



The League of Women Voters of Oregon is a 99-year-old grassroots nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. We envision informed Oregonians participating in a fully accessible, responsive, and transparent government to achieve the common good. LWVOR Legislative Action is based on advocacy positions formed through studies and member consensus. The League never supports or opposes any candidate or political party.

January 31, 2019

To: Senator Kathleen Taylor and Representative Jeff Reardon, Co-Chairs
Members of the Joint Ways and Means Committee Subcommittee on Natural Resources
Email: jwmnr.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov

Re: SB 5527–Parks and Recreation Department Budget–**Comments**

The League of Women Voters of Oregon considered our Oregon State Parks such an important part of the state’s responsibilities that, in 1999, the League adopted a comprehensive position on parks, recognizing *“that a parks system is an appropriate function of state government”* and should *“Acquire, protect and preserve natural, scenic, cultural, historic and wildlife sites and other resources.”* We called for a periodically updated long-range strategic plan giving high priority to *“Preservation and maintenance of existing parks; Protection and expansion of public access to ocean beaches; Acquisition of additional park resources; Provision of campground facilities and day-use areas; and Protection of scenic waterways.”*

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) system is a crown jewel of Oregon’s state government. Oregonians treasure their varied natural landscape across all corners of our state. Our parks system assures our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy them as well. In 1997, Oregon State Parks were at a crisis. Legislators were considering selling or privatizing them in order to deal with the increasing maintenance backlog and costs to the General Fund. Voters rose up and passed Measure 66 to help fund Oregon Parks, as well as fund the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds. In return, disappointingly, General Funds were deleted from Parks. Voters made the lottery funding permanent with Measure 76. But OPRD is at another crossroads. New programs have been added and expenses have increased. The legislature has created a number of free access programs for special user groups which reduces their fee revenue.

One of those added programs is the State Capitol State Park. The agency’s original Policy Option Package (POP) 103 would have provided an estimated \$1.2 million in funding in transfers from state agencies to support operations and maintenance of the State Capitol State Park. Agencies supported grounds keeping with an assessment in the past, but the practice was discontinued when parts of the property were transferred to Oregon Parks and Recreation Department management without funding more than 10 years ago.

The League cautioned against transferring the State Capitol grounds to OPRD. It was not that we didn’t want the grounds to be wonderful welcoming places, but that the amount of money that might be needed for the upkeep of this expansive property would be a drain on the parks budget. The Governor’s 2019-21 budget eliminated the establishment of the assessment to

state agencies. In its place, **POP 103 now is asking \$400,000 in Other Funds to be added to OPRD to conduct an evaluation of the needed repairs at the State Capital State Park** including the fountains. This evaluation will be used to determine future investments in the park. It is important that the Legislature consider how to pay for this important public property while not draining the OPRD budget unfairly, which will affect other parks properties.

In 2017, the legislature added the **Office of Outdoor Recreation**—another new program and FTE. We appreciate that this position was funded with **General Funds and hope that you will continue that funding source.** This position, as we understood, was to engage state recreation businesses in how they might add value to our state parks system and to tourism. Our other natural resource agencies, such as Fish and Wildlife, may be engaged as this Office gets up and running. The League supports multi-agency work on issues and outdoor recreation is certainly one of them.

By supporting state parks around the state, we believe that local economies benefit. State parks are magnets and users stop to dine, to shop for food or local souvenirs. Providing a nexus between local educational groups and our state parks is yet another link that should be encouraged.

We see **three main challenges** facing the Oregon state park system: **The age of many facilities, increasingly year-round demand for service without a corresponding increase in operating resources** and the increasing **effects of climate change** on our parks properties.

We believe that it is appropriate for the agency to consider demographic and activity changes when planning for the future. But it is also important not to take one economic downturn as a view of the future. Baby boomers still have another 20 years to recreate, and RV camping will be part of that activity. However, millennials may well want different experiences, so constantly considering the next market is appropriate. We will be interested to see how the new flexible fee structure works to help encourage usage at less used parks while providing those free opportunities that have been passed by previous legislatures. We are also concerned that our parks are not priced out of reach for our low-income Oregonians.

As Oregon's population grows and recent warming trends increase, the use of parks beyond the traditional summer season has caused frontline staff to be stretched thin to provide services up to the usual high Oregon standards.

We are concerned about the effects of climate change on our parks properties. We know that erosion of our beaches and shorelines are increasing. Lack of water in some parks may be an issue, as well as the need to upgrade septic systems.

We are always concerned by the limited dollars set aside under this budget **for acquisition of new properties. (POP 109 \$3 million lottery funds)** Like any real estate deal, the agency needs to have the ability to take advantage of a purchase opportunity when an important property becomes available. So having the funding flexibility to be able to acquire a new property is important. Acquisition funds allow the Department to protect iconic sites in Oregon by purchasing the property, protecting the natural and historic resources plus allowing

Oregonians to enjoy the site. Additionally, acquisition funds allow for select purchases to expand current park properties to allow a larger number of Oregonians to enjoy a popular site. We are encouraged by past legislative action when additional monies were needed to close a deal. We hope that precedent continues.

Because of the committee's discussion around acquisition versus maintenance, the League would like to point out the importance of the Key Performance Measures (KPM) and their linkage. We support continued acquisition monies in order to keep up with our population. The acres per population KPM slightly exceeded its target because of those past property purchases. The League also acknowledges the need for OPRD to continue to work on the maintenance KPM. But you may note that in 2013 they met their target. The target was increased in 2015 and again in 2017 with an improvement, but not quite meeting the 2017 target. That balance of needs in these KPMs is also included in our "position" mentioned at the beginning of this letter.

When the bill passed in 2013 to redistribute RV registration fees between the state and counties, there was a discussion regarding possible agreements related to efficiency of management and not just trading parks properties. Although we understand there were to be "regional recreation coalitions," it is unclear that the shared operational functions, marketing, or management of properties promise has been met.

The League believes that the **State Scenic Waterways Program** is important both to protection of special sections of Oregon's rivers and also to recognizing that passive river recreation is yet another movement occurring in Oregon. We are hopeful that the proposal for a stretch of the Nehalem River be designated in order to preserve the special values of that stretch of river. We would expect the agency to continue to review and consider new waterways per the requirement under state law.

League members, like all Oregonians, treasure our Oregon Parks. We hope to work with you and others to continue to keep it one of Oregon's gems.

Sincerely,



Norman Turrill
President



Peggy Lynch
Natural Resources Coordinator

cc: Lisa Sumption, Director, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
(Lisa.Sumption@oregon.gov)

<https://www.oregon.gov/oprd/Documents/2019-21OPRDGovernorBudget.pdf>