



The League of Women Voters of Oregon is a 101-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.

February 9, 2021

To: Senator Kathleen Taylor and Representative Jeff Reardon, Co-Chairs
Members of the Joint Ways and Means Committee Subcommittee on Natural Resources
Email: <https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2021R1/Committees/JWMNR/Overview>

Re: **HB 5025** - 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 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. Like in 1997, Oregon State Parks is again at a crisis. From having to close all parks back in March due to Covid-19 and the loss of lottery funding due to lack of video lottery access to having to terminate staff and reduce or stop maintenance projects, we need to be sure this crown jewel continues to survive these crises and comes back to be able to serve Oregonians and provide opportunities for out of state and out of country visitors who not only visit our parks but spend money in the local communities surrounding those parks.

When Measure 66 passed to provide lottery dollars for our parks, General Funds were deleted from their budget. 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. 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 Governor's 2019-21 budget eliminated the establishment of the assessment to state agencies. We understand there is a bill that would move the State Capitol State Park back to DAS in **SB 29** along with \$3.5 million in funding. **The League supports this bill since we opposed the move to State Parks a number of years ago as it drains OPRD funding.**

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 may be engaged in this Office as well. The League supports multi-agency work on issues and outdoor recreation is certainly one of them. But the funding should be General Funds and not taking more lottery dollars from the parks budget.

We understand that **HB 2125** includes a plan to “study” the link between State Parks and the Oregon Tourism Commission. Although we encourage multi-agency work, we are nervous at the possible outcome of such study. **HB 2125** also suggests that Parks could sell \$100 million in bonds to “stretch” their dollars. But that stretch comes with debt service costs. Not having heard more about this bill, we simply mention caution.

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.

In 2019 we saw **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. Even with Covid use pause, the demand challenge continues.

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 not be priced out of reach for our low-income Oregonians. Equity is an exciting theme in 2021. Not pricing our parks out of reach is an equity issue.**

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. With less lottery dollar revenue, we are now asking the staff that is left to do much more. We are appreciative of their caring for our parks and their willingness to step up during this crisis. They have become another set of “essential workers”.

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 note that there are limited dollars set aside under this budget for acquisition of new properties. 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.

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 note that, with this fiscal crisis, this program is taking a pause. But we would expect the agency to continue to review and consider new waterways per the requirement under state law in the future.

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,



Rebecca Gladstone
President LWVOR



Peggy Lynch
Natural Resources Coordinator

cc: Lisa Sumption, Director, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department
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