



The League of Women Voters of Oregon, established in 1920, is a 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, 2023

To: **Co-Chairs Sen. Dembrow and Rep. Pham and Members of the Committee**
[Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources](#)

Re: **[SB 5527](#) – Oregon Parks and Recreation Dept. (OPRD) 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 that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy them as well. **Like in 1997, Oregon State Parks is again at a crisis.** Measure 76's "trigger", put in to assure that monies would go out to parks programs around the state and limit agency spending, has now come to fruition—or will shortly. Who knew that our lottery revenue would grow so much? We are appreciative that the Governor recognized this issue and has provided to help bridge this funding issue for the 2023-25 biennium, but we need to address the agency's needs long term. **Over time 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. The State Capitol State Park was added. Agencies supported grounds keeping on the Capitol Mall 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.

When a 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.

In 2017, the legislature added the Office of Outdoor Recreation—another new program and FTE. At the time, it was funded with General Funds. 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 multiagency work on issues and outdoor recreation is certainly one of them. But**

the funding should be from General Funds and not take more lottery dollars from the parks budget.

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. The bonds in 2021 have started to address the first issue. **This session, we support the request by the agency (POP 107) to increase the months their “parttime” staff works at our parks.** They have become another set of “essential workers”.

We believe that it is appropriate for the agency to **consider demographic and activity changes** when planning for the future. **You watched a video** of how OPRD continues to evolve. But this means yet **additional agency support is needed** if we want to invest in these efforts. We heard the State Historic Preservation Office’s request **for a centralized data base** and acknowledge Sen. Anderson’s observations around the nexus with housing development. It would seem appropriate to **consider supporting this technical upgrade to assist this office, particularly if there is an existing program available to purchase.** Our tribal members will appreciate Oregon’s respect for their heritage.

We were supportive of the \$50 million in lottery bonds provided in 2021 to address the backlog of maintenance issues, but bonds come with debt service costs which need to be paid. And the maintenance just keeps growing as some of our parks’ infrastructure needs repair or replacement—at significant cost. Lack of water in some parks may be an issue as well as the need to upgrade septic systems as you heard in the hearing. **We wonder if there are federal monies that might be accessed to help with some of these large projects?** But the agency may need staff help to write the grants to access these monies.

The effects of climate change on our parks’ properties, such as was mentioned with Cape Lookout, must be addressed before they become unusable. We know that erosion of our beaches and shorelines is increasing. The public’s safety must be considered. We owe it to the next generations to take care of our state treasures.

The committee had questions about OPRD’s fee structure. 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. Not pricing our parks out of reach is an equity issue. We are also concerned that our parks not be priced out of reach for our low-income Oregonians. Equity was an exciting theme in 2021 and again in 2023. At minimum, wherever possible we need to find ways to provide free access to our day use parks.

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.

The League believes that the State Scenic Waterways Program is important both to protection of special sections of Oregon's rivers and also to recognize that passive river recreation is yet another movement occurring in Oregon. We note that this program continues to take 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. We ask that you consider our comments as you work this budget.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this legislation.



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