

# House Bill 1025 (Reps. Wicks and Eslick) Senate Bill 5006 (Sen. Van De Wege)

Please Pass This Legislation to Provide a Vital Funding Tool for Local Parks Agencies



**P**arks and recreation investments provide local communities with many benefits. They give us venues for outdoor activities, fresh air, and physical health and well-being – all of which have never been more important than in the COVID-19 environment. They provide low-cost or no-cost, equitable opportunities for all people to recreate, welcoming all races, income levels, and genders. They bring quality of life through open space and facilities and trail networks that make communities more attractive, healthy and vibrant. They help sell homes, create jobs, and fuel economic development.

Investing in and maintaining parks and open spaces takes dedicated and committed funding, which has become more and more challenging for local agencies facing growing maintenance and operations backlogs, facing the perils of property tax pro-rationing in some cases, and seeing event-based and fee-based programming canceled across the board under COVID-19. HB 1025/SB 5006 is designed to give financially-restricted and COVID-19-impacted local parks agencies a tool they can take to their voters to help them meet growing funding challenges, increased demands, and increasing populations.

It's about **EQUITY** - Not all agencies across the state have the same local funding tools, resulting in areas with low per capita investment in parks in under-served communities. - HB 1025 helps ensure that local parks agencies can more equitably spread the cost of paying for parks and recreation services to all residents and to visitors to a given community. Absent such legislative solutions, local agencies are under more pressure to utilize fee-for-service programming that exacerbates the challenges of equitable access.

In Fall 2020, the Washington Recreation & Park Association, in collaboration with the Association of Washington Cities (AWC), Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC), and Metro Parks Tacoma, completed its most comprehensive survey ever of local parks and recreation agencies. (Recommend include LINK). The 74 participating agencies manage over 120,500 acres of park land across the state, accommodating just under 38 million users annually.

The WRPA survey showed local parks agencies suffering from average budget reductions of over 23 percent and drops in earned revenues of about 60 percent. Just as importantly, the survey also found that *“COVID-19 has significantly drained operating resources while triggering a heavy increase in demand on the public spaces that offered Washingtonians a safe, healthy respite during the pandemic.”* Demand for the passive use of parks and open spaces was up 65 percent – with one community seeing a 170 percent increase in demand on its parks and trails.

All this comes on top of a 2018 National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and Pennsylvania State University research study which showed that parks and recreation agencies and divisions of local governments took the heaviest brunt of budget cuts made during the Great Recession (from 2008-2012) and were among the slowest to recover after the Recession.

At a time when the State of Washington is simply not equipped to provide direct allocations or assistance to local parks agencies, HB 1025/SB 5006 provides an important tool that agencies can bring to their voters in their local communities.

The legislation sponsored by Reps. Emily Wicks (D-38<sup>th</sup> Dist.) and Carolyn Eslick (R-39<sup>th</sup> Dist.) and Sen. Kevin Van De Wege (D-24<sup>th</sup> Dist.) would:

- Provide an important tool for local parks agencies to address gaps in service equity and funding;
- Provide a 1/10th of 1 cent sales tax option, subject to voter approval;
- Allow all types of agencies - city-run, county-run, Metropolitan Parks Districts and Park Districts - to take this option to their voters;
- Allow local park agencies to bond against the revenue;
- Provide tax authority for a fixed period of time -- 10 years - or the length of bonding for those who issue debt backed by the new revenue;
- Include provisions to ensure no double-taxation will occur;
  - Include provisions encouraging local parks agencies that gain voter approval from the 1/10<sup>th</sup> of 1 cent sales tax funding to integrate into their plans ways to enhance equitable access to their facilities for all residents and users.



Photos by Jim Kopriva and Skagit County