

Wanted: Billions for irrigation, water projects

Statewide parcel fee tossed out, no sub yet

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Washington state lawmakers are hunting for billions of dollars for water projects, including major irrigation undertakings. So far, there are many ideas for spending money, but no popular way for raising it.

Legislators “still haven’t come up with one that’s acceptable to the majority,” Yakima Valley Sen. Jim Honeyford said Monday.

Some agricultural interests have aligned with flood-control and pollution-reduction advocates, hoping the three-way partnership will muster political support for funding ambitious and expensive projects.

The effort stumbled in the 2015 session. Honeyford, whose farm-rich district has suffered in the drought, and Sen. John Braun from flood-prone Lewis County proposed a statewide \$35 per parcel tax to raise some \$6 billion over 20 years.

Honeyford, a Sunnyside Republican, said Monday that the parcel fee has been “thrown out.” Nothing has taken its place.

Although Honeyford and Braun’s plan stalled, the House created a water task force, which met for the first time Monday.

The task force heard agriculture and conservation groups praise various projects, though nobody proposed a funding mechanism.

There were several suggestions for other ways to the

spend money, such as replacing culverts, floodplain restoration and improving municipal water systems.

Honeyford said after the meeting that he wants to limit the program to irrigation, flood control and preventing storm-water pollution. Otherwise, the Legislature will need to raise more money or have less funds for the three main purposes, he said.

Honeyford said lawmakers could ask voters in a statewide referendum to borrow the money and pay it back from the general fund. He quickly noted, however, that legislators are still struggling to increase education funding, as ordered by the state Supreme Court.

If legislators find a way to fund water projects, some money presumably would go toward increasing water avail-



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Washington state Sens. John Braun, left, and Jim Honeyford listen during a meeting on water issues Oct. 5 in Olympia. Braun and Honeyford joined a House task force looking into how to fund irrigation, flood control and pollution reduction projects.

able to Yakima Valley farmers in drought years. A coalition of growers, environmentalists, tribes and government agencies finalized a 30-year, \$3.8 billion plan in 2012. The state has committed \$30 mil-

lion over the next two years to move the plan ahead, but the plan calls for spending nearly \$900 million over the next decade. Federal funding is a possibility, but the amount is uncertain.

Also, the state Department of Ecology estimates replacing farm wells drawing from the depleting Odessa Subarea aquifer with surface water in Eastern Washington will cost \$365 million through 2030.

Kittitas Reclamation District manager Urban Eberhart said that to win funding for irrigation projects, agriculture groups must form an alliance with other interests.

“That is what is going to make it work,” he said. “You’re not going to be successful going it alone.”

Some homeowners and environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, voiced their opposition at the House meeting to the Yakima water plan. They say increasing water storage at reservoirs will submerge recreation areas and deliver too little benefit to taxpayers.

Ironman record holder to promote Idaho potatoes

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

EAGLE, Idaho — An icon in endurance sports has agreed to promote the nutritional value of Idaho potatoes while raising funds for an organization that assists families in adopting international children with Down syndrome.

The Idaho Potato Commission has donated \$25,000 per year to Utah-based Racing for Orphans with Down Syndrome, also known as RODS Racing, since the organization was founded in 2013.

IPC President and CEO Frank Muir has agreed to let RODS use IPC’s annual contribution to bring Ironman triathlete James Lawrence, known as the Iron Cowboy, on board for a two-year contract as a RODS spokesman “fueled by Idaho potatoes.”

“Potatoes have been a staple in my fitness nutrition for years,” Lawrence said, via email.

Lawrence, of Utah, recently set a record by completing 50 Ironman races in 50 days covering all 50 states. An Ironman consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run. Lawrence’s supporters set up courses and arranged special races in each state.

Lawrence said he pursued the record — which he considers to be the toughest endurance feat ever accomplished — to inspire others to be more active.

“During the 50 events in 50 days through all 50 states, my team made sure I had potatoes on hand,” Lawrence said.



Photo submitted

James Lawrence, known as the Iron Cowboy, participates in the cycling component of an Ironman distance race. Lawrence, who recently set a record by competing in 50 Ironman races in 50 days in 50 states, will now raise funds for an organization that helps families adopt international children with Down syndrome, while raising awareness about the nutritional benefits of Idaho potatoes.

“They were a part of my daily routine and fueled my way into the history books as the only person alive to complete the 50-50-50 challenge.”

RODS now has 200 long-distance athletes who find sponsors for their races to help families who adopt a chosen RODS child. RODS covers roughly half of international adoption fees, which can approach \$40,000.

Muir explained endurance sports are a good fit for promoting Idaho potatoes, as many distance athletes keep foil-wrapped spuds in their pouches for an in-race energy boost. He’s confident Lawrence will raise the organization’s profile, and send a positive message about potato

nutrition. “Anybody who does long-distance training, running or biking, potatoes are a very important part of their diet,” Muir said. “They minimize muscle cramping and are easy to digest.”

Lawrence likes to cut his spuds into cubes and bake them into “crispy treats,” consumed during his biking sessions.

In the near future, Lawrence intends to focus on fundraising, speaking and coaching.

RODS founder Brady Murray said his organization has raised nearly \$500,000 thus far and has set a goal of raising \$1 million during the next two years, capitalizing on

Lawrence’s name recognition. Murray said 10 international children with Down syndrome now have loving homes thanks to IPC’s contributions.

Murray said Lawrence is especially concerned about childhood obesity and has been active in promoting a healthy lifestyle for children.

“This is an opportunity for Idaho potatoes to have an incredible spokesperson,” Murray said. “James is a big advocate for whole foods and using potatoes as a fuel source for endurance athletes.”

Murray founded RODS after his son was born with Down syndrome and he learned in many foreign countries, children with the disorder are institutionalized.

Washington Supreme Court approves closed advisory group meetings

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Washington Supreme Court on Thursday ruled public agencies can close some advisory group meetings to the public, rejecting a claim by a property-rights group that San Juan County violated the state’s open meetings law in crafting land-use restrictions.

The 6-3 decision found that the county’s “critical areas ordinance team” wasn’t required to announce meetings or allow the public to attend.

San Juan County’s administrator formed the group in 2012 as the county updated its Growth Management Act rules for buffers around wetlands, wildlife habitat and other areas.

The Citizens Alliance for Property Rights Legal Fund sued to overturn the policies, arguing they were invalid because the advisory group’s closed meetings were illegal.

At issue was whether the state’s Open Public Meetings Act applies to groups that could influence policies but don’t have the final say.

State agencies commonly have advisory panels on topics such as wolf recovery, agriculture-related water issues and wildlife management.

A Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife policy calls for its advisory group meetings to be public, but recently it closed portions of two Wolf Advisory Group meetings.

The high court’s majority cited three reasons San Juan County didn’t violate the law: The group didn’t include a ma-

majority of the county council; it apparently wasn’t created by the council; and it didn’t act on behalf of the council.

Writing for the majority, Justice Charles Wiggins noted there was no official list of members or written purpose for the “informal group.” The plaintiffs were able to determine after filing suit that the group included three council members, county planners and a scientific consultant.

In the dissenting opinion, Justice Mary Yu said the group’s vague nature didn’t justify closing the meetings.

“Nothing about the (Open Public Meetings Act) endorses the view that informality is an adequate substitute for open government,” she wrote. “This lack of documentation and institutional amnesia only emphasized the importance of public oversight under the (meetings law.)”

Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson and the Washington State Association of Municipal Attorneys filed briefs supporting San Juan County.

The alliance’s court allies includes Allied Daily Newspapers of Washington, the Building Industry Association of Washington and the Pacific Legal Foundation.

A Superior Court judge and the Court of Appeals had dismissed the alliance’s complaint, but the group’s president, Jeff Wright, said Thursday in an interview that he thought the alliance would prevail in the Supreme Court.

He said the ruling provided public agencies with a “blueprint” for evading public scrutiny.

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Brad Muir
Commercial Team Lead, Washington Trust Bank

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