

Kopachuck State Park is one of Washington state's finest assets

Editor's note: This column has been adapted from comments Gerry Baldwin made on behalf of Preserve Our Parks before the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission in Tumwater on March 5, 2009.

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Special to the Gateway

Chairman Scull, Director Derr, esteemed members of the commission, ladies and gentlemen, fellow taxpayers: I'm here representing Preserve Our Parks. POP is a society of like-minded people with one purpose — the preservation of our incomparable state parks.

When my company transferred me here 23 years ago, I looked around to see, among other things, how Washington compared with places I had lived before: Illinois, Florida, California and Texas. I noticed the freeway markings were far behind those in California. Public transportation left much to be desired. Our infrastructure begged for overhaul.

I noticed one more thing, a good thing — a great thing: Washington State far excelled those other states in its state parks.

Over the ensuing decades, for better or worse, Washington largely caught up with other states in terms of infrastructure administration and remained well ahead in state parks. We must not regress toward the mean in this transcendent area. Our parks are our crown jewels. We cannot surrender them at the first sign of economic hardship.

Indeed, to do so would prove penny wise and pound foolish. Kopachuck State Park, acquired by the state in three parcels from 1955-72, cost taxpayers \$641,500.

At a time when most beaches in our area are private, it affords more than a mile of beach access to children and others who might otherwise have no access to a beach at all.

Our best guess of Kopachuck's annual operating cost today is \$119,300, or about \$1 for each visitor to the park. Our quick estimate of its intrinsic value today, based on property in proximity to it, is \$35 million.

To lightly surrender our state property worth 293 times its annual operating cost in the name of savings is higher math lost on me. None other than Albert Einstein famously said, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

Let's turn, then, to those things that do count.

► **The ranger.** A ranger is not a peace officer, not a naturalist, not an outdoorsman, not a mentor, a teacher, an environmentalist, protector or preservationist. A ranger is all those things — and at a bargain-basement price. I do not want to embarrass our beloved rangers, but their salaries are a matter of public record. For all their education, training and love of their mission, they make about half the pay of a county sheriff's deputy. Yet, they keep the

Share your memories

The Preserve Our Parks organization hosted a public thank-you party for those who supported Kopachuck and Joemma Beach state parks when they were on the state Legislature's chopping block earlier this year.

Did you attend the event? Do you have fond memories of either park you'd like to share? Submit a letter to the editor up to 250 words by e-mail at gatewayeditor@gateway.com, or by mail at: Letters to the Editor, The Peninsula Gateway, 3555 Trirkson St., Gig Harbor, WA 98335

peace in our park. Further, their presence in our park prevents crime before it happens.

► **County deputies and first responders.** By definition, their reaction is a response to probable cause that a crime is in progress or has already happened. Our live-in ranger at Kopachuck is like a lock on a door, keeping honest folks honest and driving would-be perpetrators to simpler pickings.

Speaking of pickings, on Sunday, March 1, when 600 people came out during a cold, driving rain to show their support for keeping Kopachuck as a state park, poachers were picking salal for sale to florists.

The rangers put a quick stop to it. Can you imagine the reaction of a 9-1-1 operator to a call reporting that people were picking salal at Kopachuck? Our rangers provide a similar role in preventing over-harvesting and out-of-season harvesting of shellfish and other resources at the park.

I compare our rangers to deputies for a reason. If this commission were to transfer Kopachuck, the only likely recipient would be Peninsula Metropolitan Parks.

I know that the people of PenMet Parks, like the people here, love parks. But they have even less money than does this state department. If they were to take over administration of Kopachuck, they would immediately have to seek outside support.

For safety, that means the Pierce County sheriff, for Kopachuck is miles from the City of Gig Harbor. To provide 24-hour patrol would take five deputies.

Here is what Pierce County Sheriff Paul A. Pastor has to say about the prospect of taking on the policing of Kopachuck:

"Parks are valuable and are important aspects of the quality of life in our area. Kopachuck State Park is a wonderful place — I used to take my kids there when they were growing up. Removing ranger/police/security services from the park makes it vulnerable to being taken over by law breakers who are looking for a place to hide.

"Several years ago, we had a problem with drug manufacturing and dealing in parks. It was only through a concerted and costly effort that we removed meth labs and meth markets. No one benefits if parks are left abandoned to criminals. Crime and criminals in parks will cause them to be avoided by

decent people and will cause them to become hang-outs for those who break the law and victimize others."

PenMet, too, would have to seek operating capital, for it has no money for such at this time. That would mean a levy.

Let's not even examine the prospect that the levy might fail. Still, if it were to pass, the payback would fall to all the residents of the Gig Harbor peninsulas, whether they use the park or not; and none would fall to those outsiders whom we would welcome to our park.

A modest user fee, note that it would take only about \$1 per visitor to break even, makes much better sense. In the first 39 days after POP's inception, we garnered more than 2,000 signatures of support from residents of 36 cities in Washington and from other states. Not one of those people would object to a token fee if it meant keeping the park as is.

Moreover, a fee is not the only means of enhancing revenue. With ranger oversight and volunteer support, we can open a concession stand at Kopachuck with proceeds to the park. Staffed by volunteers, we could rent canoes for visits to Cutts Island, rent snorkel gear, and sell drinks and snacks.

We could easily make up the shortfall just by opening during the busy summer months.

That begs the question of an "opt out" statewide fee for all state parks, often referred to as the Montana Plan. We could institute a \$5 fee on automobile tag and driver's license issuance that would require people so inclined to opt out, rather than opt in. (Note: This is the plan adopted by the state Legislature and signed into law by the governor. — Editor)

I want to stress that we come here, today, not to condemn this commission for its stewardship of our beloved Kopachuck but to praise this commission. I believe you embody the spirit of a Native American proverb that, "We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children."

You are doing a fine job, an exemplary job of administering our precious resources. We believe that no one can do as good a job as you.

With no malice toward PenMet Parks, if they were to emulate your administration of Kopachuck with no loss in services or safety, we believe they would consume four times as much of our money. They cannot afford that; and we cannot afford that.

That leaves us with the inevitable conclusion that the cost would go up as the level of service and safety would go down.

To take it further, before long, our much-loved Kopachuck would loom as a diminishing public resource that would force us to think the unthinkable — permanent closure — or, worse, sale to commercial development.

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