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Wednesday, March 13, 2019

Trail advocates,

Trails have not escaped the effects of Gov. Mike Dunleavy's budget cuts. While trail development and maintenance have not completely been cut from the governor's budget, massive changes are a definite possibility. Please do what you can to help us save Alaska's trails, one of our most important resources.

Steve Cleary

Executive Director
Alaska Trails

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WHAT COULD HAPPEN

Recreational Trails Program: Local governments and nonprofits could lose out

Gov. Dunleavy is recommending cutting one of the two main administrators of the Recreational Trails Program (RTP). The RTP is the main trail funder in the state, bringing in \$1.5 million per year. This is federal money derived from the estimated portion of fuel taxes used by off-highway vehicles. The state pays about \$300,000 a year to administer this program, but about \$100,000 of those funds comes from the program. So, it costs the state about \$200,000 to accept and distribute these funds. To find out more about the RTP see the webpage addresses at the end of this letter.

Currently about half of RTP funds go to the state and the rest go to other entities, such as local governments and nonprofit groups. But if only one person is left to administer the

funds, then that person will look for extreme efficiencies. That will likely mean that all funds go to the state. See farther in this letter for examples of projects recently sponsored by entities other than the state government.

Also, there is a concern as to whether the state has the capacity—personnel, equipment, etc.—to take on that many more projects. If not, the money goes back to the federal government.

Alaska share of the Land and Water Conservation Fund could be eliminated

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is another federal program. It requires a 50-50 match and is open only to state agencies and regional and local governments. However, nonprofits have sometimes partnered with local governments to get access to these funds. While not solely for trails, many trail projects have benefited from this fund.

Administration of these funds appears to have been zeroed out in Gov. Dunleavy's budget. It is unclear if this is a mistake. This is another situation in which a minor amount of administration cost (a few hundred thousand dollars) results in millions of dollars coming into the state. (Learning the specifics has been difficult because the Dunleavy administration will not allow state employees to discuss these matters and governor's office is not yet supplying the information.)

The governor and legislators need to be reminded how much this program brings to the state (and that funds that don't go to Alaska will go to another state.) To find out more about the LWCF see the webpage addresses toward the end of this letter.

Snowmobile Trails Program would be cut

This program is near and dear to many people and is arguably a user fee. While the Alaska Constitution does not allow dedicated funds, for years governors and legislators have agreed to fund the STP the same amount as is collected each year from snowmachine registration fees (about \$160,000 per year). The STP provides funds for groomed trails, signage and safety programs. The trail grooming and signage of the STP benefits anyone who uses these trails, which also includes mushers, bikers, skiers, and even hikers. To find out more about the STP see the webpage address toward the end of this letter.

The STP helps boost the economy of many local communities through winter tourism, especially important during a time of the year when tourism dollars are hard to come by. It also helps cut down on search and rescue operations by the Alaska State Troopers since trails that are well signed and groomed reduce the number of lost winter trail users.

Gov. Dunleavy has decided to cut the Snowmobile Trails Program. The registration fees would still be collected. Gov. Walker tried to cut this program, but a public outcry by citizens and legislators brought it back.

Read a recent letter by the Petersville Community group protesting removal of the program: <http://www.petersvillecommunitynpc.org/>

NOTE: Gov. Dunleavy's budget calls for spending \$25 million on the South Denali Visitor's Center (<http://tinyurl.com/y3ug5rww>). For far less than \$1 million the RTP, LCWF, and STP could all be restored.

WHAT TO DO

Amidst all the other cuts, trails might seem to be a minor thing. However, as the legislature and governor deal with a huge budget crisis, they must decide what to cut and what to keep. If no one speaks up about trails, the governor and legislators might think no one really cares about cuts to trails.

- Write to, email or call the governor and your legislators to remind them about the importance of these programs. Urge them to make sure these programs and their state administrators are fully funded. Remind them why trails are important (see points below).
 - Gov. Dunleavy's contact info: <https://gov.alaska.gov/contact/>
 - Alaska State Legislature contact info: <http://w3.legis.state.ak.us/>
- Speak out when budget hearings are held. If you don't know when these are happening, ask one of your legislators or the Legislative Information Office.
 - LIO webpage: <https://akleg.gov/laa/lho.php>
- Urge your local governments to speak out.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

Note: Unique letters always carry more impact. We have included an example letter at the end of this letter. If you decide to use the example letter, please try to individualize it in some way, such as by including specific ways in which you or your group will be hurt by the possible budget cuts.

WHY TRAILS ARE IMPORTANT

When looking for places to cut the budget, some may look to trails as being a nice but somewhat frivolous part of the state's infrastructure. In fact, trails are incredibly important in many ways.

Trails allow people access to our natural resources.

- Hunters, berry and mushroom pickers, fisherman, trappers, miners, and photographers all use trails. Without trails these natural resources would be much harder to use and in some cases virtually impossible.

Trails offer people a safe and healthy place to exercise.

- With obesity becoming a growing problem for society, we need to encourage people to stay active. People use trails in so many ways - skiing, running, hiking, biking, sledding or just taking a stroll. Even motorized trail users get more exercise than just hanging around the house. And research shows that exercising in nature offers greater mental health benefits than exercising indoors. Research also shows that money spent on trails saves much more in direct medical benefits.

Trails provide jobs

- Many people rely on trails for their livelihood. Guides offer services for a wide variety of activities such as hiking, snowmachining, four-wheeling, mountain biking, rafting, hunting, and fishing. Other people provide contracting service for building and maintaining trails.

Trails bring money into the state

- Programs such as the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) and the Land and Water Conservation Fund funnel federal money into the state for trails-related projects. The RTP typically costs the state just \$200,000 but brings in \$1.5 million, offering the state a better than 7-to-1 return.

Trails help provide social glue

- Many groups gather together with a focus of getting out on the trails, such as snowmachiners, bikers, runners, walkers, birdwatchers, boaters. These experiences help forge social bonds that improve and maintain individual and societal health.

Trails reduce pressure on our roads

- Trails help reduce conflicts between automobiles and non-motorized users, such as bikers and runners. In places with sufficient trail access, trails help reduce traffic by giving people an alternative to commuting by car.

RECENT RTP PROJECTS BY ENTITIES OTHER THAN THE STATE

Below are RTP-funded projects from 2017 and 2018 that were sponsored by entities other than the state Department of Parks and Outdoor Recreation. It is highly likely that most or all of these projects would not have been funded under the administration level proposed by Gov. Dunleavy. (Please note that State Parks, however, might benefit from increased funding.)

Listed alphabetically by Group, Project

- Alaska Trails, Mirror Lake singletrack trails
- Anchorage Park Foundation, Improvements at Jodhpur Motocross Trail
- Anchorage Park Foundation, Russian Jack Springs Park, Single Track bike trail
- Curry Ridge Riders, South Denali Trail Signs
- Delta Junction Trails Association, Liewer Community Trail Lighting
- Delta Junction, Bluff Cabin Trail restoration
- Fairbanks North Star Borough, Skyline Ridge Park Trail Restoration
- Fairbanks North Star Borough, Tanana Lakes, Eagle Trail
- Federation of Community Councils, Govt. Hill West Bluff Trail Connection
- Girdwood Mountain Bike Alliance, Girdwood Mountain Bike Park
- Ground Truth Trekking, Kachemak Bay State Park, Tutka Backdoor Access and Continuity

- Ground Truth Trekking, Taylor Bay Trail, Kachemak Bay State Park
- Levitation 49, Shoup Trail Re-Opening
- Sitka Trail Works, Mosquito Cove Trail Repair
- Tsalteshi Trails Association, Kenai Peninsula: Slikok Trail Expansion
- Upper Susitna Soil & Water Conservation District, Susitna Valley High School Trails,
- USFS Chugach National Forest, Bartlett Glacier Trail
- USFS Chugach National Forest, Winner Creek Trail
- Willow Trails Committee, Willow Park Trail

MORE INFORMATION ON TRAIL PROGRAMS

Recreational Trail Program webpages

- Alaska: <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/grants/trails.htm>
- Federal: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/
- Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recreational_Trails_Program

Land and Water Conservation Fund

- Alaska: <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/grants/lwcf.htm>
- Federal: <https://www.doi.gov/lwcf>
- Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_and_Water_Conservation_Fund

Snowmobile Trails Program

- <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/grants/snowmotr.htm>

AN EXAMPLE LETTER

While this letter is written to Gov. Dunleavy, it can be adapted to be sent to our state representatives.

Governor Mike Dunleavy
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 110001
Juneau, AK 99811-0001

Dear Gov. Dunleavy,

We urge you to reconsider the cuts to trails programs you have recommended in your budget. The cuts are tiny in regard to the entire state budget, but they will have a huge impact on trails and will likely cost the state far more in lost federal funds. We are most concerned about three areas: the Recreational Trails Program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Snowmobile Trails Program.

RECREATIONAL TRAILS PROGRAM

The RTP brings Alaska about \$1.5 million per year in federal money derived from the estimated portion of fuel taxes used by off-highway vehicles. The state pays about \$300,000 a year to administer this program, but about \$100,000 of those funds come from the program. So, it costs the state only about \$200,000 to accept and distribute these funds. Your budget would cut one of the two main administrators of the RTP program.

Currently about half of RTP funds go to the state and the rest go to other entities, such as local governments and nonprofit groups. But if only one person is left to administer the funds, then that person will look for extreme efficiencies. That will likely mean that all funds go to the state.

Besides being damaging to local entities, we are concerned that the state does not have the capacity—personnel, equipment, etc.—to take on that many more projects. If not, some of the RTP money will go back to the federal government. This does not make financial sense. Please reconsider and fund the other RTP administrative position.

LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND

The LWCF, another federal program, has brought about \$40 million to the state since the program began in 1965. It provides grants for projects featuring “close-to-home” outdoor recreational opportunities for the public, including trails. LWCF grants require a 50-50 match and are open only to state agencies and regional and local governments.

This is another situation in which a minor amount of administration cost (a few hundred thousand dollars) results in millions of dollars coming into the state. But administration of these funds appears to have been zeroed out in your budget. Is this a mistake? Without this minor administration cost we could lose millions of dollars. Those funds will go back to the federal government. Please reconsider and fund administration of the LWCF so that we can continue getting our fair share of those funds.

SNOWMOBILE TRAILS PROGRAM

This program is near and dear to many people and is arguably a user fee. While the Alaska Constitution does not allow dedicated funds, for years governors and legislators have agreed to fund the STP the same amount as is collected each year from snowmachine registration fees (about \$160,000 per year). The STP provides funds for groomed trails, signage and safety programs. The trail grooming and signage of the STP benefits anyone who uses these trails, which also includes mushers, bikers, skiers, and even hikers.

The STP helps boost the economy of many local communities through winter tourism, especially important during a time of the year when tourism dollars are hard to come by. It also helps cut down on search and rescue operations by the Alaska State Troopers since trails that are well signed and groomed reduce the number of lost winter trail users. Please reconsider and reinstate the Snowmobile Trails Program.

TRAILS ARE IMPORTANT

At first glance trails may seem like a nice extra that should be funded only during times of plenty. But on closer look, trails are clearly essential in many ways. Trails do many things, such as:

- Allow people access to our natural resources
- Offer people a safe and healthy place to exercise
- Help provide social glue by providing a place for active people to recreate
- Provide jobs for small businesses
- Reduce pressure on our roads

Please reconsider the cuts you have made to these essential trail programs. In the end, they will harm the state far more than the few hundred thousand dollars saved.

Sincerely,