

March 26, 2012

The Honorable Christine Gregoire  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 40002  
Olympia, Washington 98504

Dear Governor Gregoire,

This letter is to inform you, the Legislature, and the State Parks and Recreation Commission (Commission) that the Fort Worden Lifelong Learning Center Public Development Authority (FWPDA) has heard the concerns from some legislators, the Governor's Office, and some citizens about the transfer of an iconic state asset to a municipal entity.

We understand that a transfer of Fort Worden State Park in its entirety to the FWPDA is not an acceptable option. However, we are open to exploring a long-term lease and/or a partial transfer option with State Parks to implement the Lifelong Learning Center vision at Fort Worden State Park.

We are very concerned that injecting the Legislature into the final decision-making process will only further delay and increase the cost of moving forward with the Lifelong Learning Center. Seeking approval from both the Commission and the Legislature at some unspecified future date is not a workable strategy.

As described in the House and Senate budget provisos, we are committed to providing an updated business plan to the Legislature and Commission no later than October 1, 2012. We respectfully request independent third-party review of this plan and a fixed Commission deadline of December 31, 2012, to determine the governance structure best suited to implement and manage the Lifelong Learning Center. This would provide the FWPDA the assurance that there is a commitment from the state before investing more time and resources into this process.

In the remarks you made to the Commission on February 9, you stated that you do not have a clear path to help State Parks become sustainable, and that time was of the essence. Furthermore, you urged the Commission to:

*“Think about local governments, who might want to at least temporarily, if not permanently, keep a state park. And if you can have the confidence that they’re capable and you will hold them accountable, they may very well be able to do that. And we should allow that to happen. Start looking at ourselves not as a parks commission, but a set of entrepreneurs who are looking at a new way of doing business. Your job is to market. Your job is to come up with a new idea that’s unique and will be embraced by the people of the state of Washington.”*

With respect to Fort Worden State Park, we do have a plan. It was adopted by the Commission in 2008 after an extensive public process and over \$1 million invested in its outcome. The FWPDA, while remaining publicly accountable, is the embodiment of the “enterprise” approach you seek for State Parks.

As we update the approved business plan we remain confident that Fort Worden can become self-supporting as a center of lifelong learning, keep public access to campgrounds, beaches and trails, and sustain this iconic state park for all users. In fact, the eight years of work that have gone into this plan have been focused entirely on developing better ways to preserve and enhance this iconic park for all people.

In approving the vision for the Lifelong Learning Center in 2008, State Parks acknowledged that it cannot provide the expertise and organizational capacity required to implement the vision. The findings from the business plan and related documents prepared by State Parks, and approved by the Commission, provide extensive rationale for the Commissioners, public and Legislature alike, to move forward with new governance for Fort Worden.

Since January 2011, we have been told by State Parks that a public development authority could serve as the new managing entity at Fort Worden. There were State Parks resolutions (March 2011 and February 2012) as well as agreement to submit collaborative legislation that recognized the FWPDA as this entity. State Parks Director Don Hoch, Assistant Director Larry Fairleigh and Commissioner Rodger Schmitt have stated that State Parks wants the FWPDA to be successful and say they are committed to the Lifelong Learning Center implementation process.

The City of Port Townsend has stepped up and committed both capital and operational dollars to support this effort. The Fort Worden Conservancy has provided philanthropic support to get the FWPDA up and running. We have partnered with Peninsula College to renovate Building 202 as a higher education center and as the catalyst project of the Lifelong Learning Center. A highly qualified and dedicated board of directors has been appointed to the FWPDA, bringing new thinking and resources to the task of preserving and enhancing Fort Worden as one of Washington’s most beloved parks. There is broad community support for the Lifelong Learning Center. All 15 nonprofits and businesses at Fort Worden support the FWPDA as the new governance entity.

At this time, what is lacking is a commitment from State government on how to move ahead. The Governor’s Office and Commission must demonstrate a willingness and leadership to the transition to an “enterprise” model. Absent a stated State sanction, the FWPDA has no standing. It will be extremely difficult to secure the additional private funding to spend another year working on this without a clear State commitment to a timeline and an outcome.

We respectfully request that the Commission be urged to take action on a final plan for management at Fort Worden State Park by the end of the year. Further, that State Parks staff and the FWPDA work together to provide a business and management plan to the Commission and the appropriate committee(s) of the legislature by October 1, 2012 for their review and comment. The plan should also be reviewed by an independent third party business plan expert mutually selected by the FWPDA and State Parks as well as reviewed by the Office of Financial Management. Finally, the Commission and FWPDA should be directed to complete a final report to the Legislature by December 31, 2012 that recommends any additional statutory changes necessary to facilitate the successful transition of Fort Worden State Park into a lifelong learning center.

Let's make it happen. The biggest risk is continuation of status quo: State Parks is left with at least a \$700,000 annual operating deficit at Fort Worden. State Parks has acknowledged that it does not have the capability to develop and manage the Lifelong Learning Center approved in its own 2008 plan. We are confident that we can make the Fort Worden Lifelong Learning Center financially sustainable over the long-term. The FWPDA has worked hard and invested much in a better outcome.

Governor Gregoire, we call on you for your leadership, help and support.

Respectfully,

Cindy Hill Finnie, Chair  
Fort Worden Public Development Authority

Cc: Senator Hargrove  
Representative Van De Wege  
Representative Tharinger  
State Parks & Recreation Commission  
Don Hoch, Director, State Parks  
City of Port Townsend City Council