

Boosting Montana's Quality of Life



The LWCF, a little-known federal funding source, has helped build local parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, and other recreational facilities across the state. But will the money keep coming?

By Sam Curtis
Photos by Erik Peterson

Anaconda skateboarder Tyler Kenney carves his board around the curves of the Smelter City Skate Pit and coasts to a stop, casually grabbing the board as he flips it up with his foot. For the 17-year-old high schooler and his teenage friends, the new skate park has become the town's social center, a place where kids can play, exercise, and hang out in a safe, well-lit environment.

"I'm here almost every day of the week," says Kenney. "At night, around 6 o'clock, it's packed with kids, and a lot of them aren't even skateboarding. They're just here to talk and visit."

For years, Kenney and his friends had been frustrated that the city lacked a skateboard park. So was Melinda Riley, interim planning director for the cities of Anaconda and Deer Lodge.

"The kids used to skateboard all around town, and they kept getting kicked out of other parks because they were damaging equipment and facilities," she says. "Finally, they actually came to the planning department and said, 'Look, we're willing to go somewhere else if you guys will build us a skateboard park.'"

County officials bought into the idea but lacked the funds to make it happen. So they applied for a \$75,000 grant from a little-known federal program called the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The fund was created expressly to help support local recreational facilities such as the one proposed by the Anaconda teens.

Local groups and individuals pitched in to help raise matching dollars required by the federal grant program. The skateboarders did their share too, holding several fundraisers that generated \$6,000.

Kenney says he enjoyed helping raise money for the project. "It was good to be a part of that," he says. But when you ask him and his friends if they've ever heard of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, they say, "The *what?*"

You'll get the same response from most people who use and enjoy LWCF-funded outdoor recreational facilities around Montana. And that's not good, say state and local officials who have seen how the fund has boosted the quality of life in communities statewide. According to Walt Timmerman, Recreation Bureau chief for Montana Fish,



STOKED TO SKATE Anaconda teenagers helped raise funds to match a \$75,000 LWCF grant. The money built a new skateboard park, which has become a safe, well-lit social center for kids.

Wildlife & Parks, which administers LWCF grants in Montana, the fund's low profile makes it extremely vulnerable to federal funding cuts. It's happened in the past—though only temporarily—but the program could very well disappear altogether.

"I'm afraid Montanans won't know it's gone until it's too late," Timmerman says.

40,000 projects nationwide

Congress established the Land and Water Conservation Fund in 1964 to provide quality outdoor recreational opportunities and conserve the land and water that support those opportunities.

Since then, the LWCF has funded more than 40,000 projects nationwide, in almost every county in the country. Typical projects are baseball fields, walking and riding trails, picnic sites, playgrounds, campgrounds, swimming pools, boat ramps, nature



reserves, and even hunting and fishing areas. Montana has received more than \$33 million for outdoor recreation since the fund's inception. "I'd estimate that 90 percent of the recreational facilities built in Montana over the past 40 years have used LWCF funds," says Timmerman.

Recent grants included \$30,000 to Polson to improve a ballpark, \$71,000 to the Colstrip Park District for a new park pavilion, and \$21,000 to Twin Bridges to improve its city park.

Since 1981, the fund has been administered at the federal level by the National Park Service. It has two components, one for federal projects like those carried out by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, and another for state and local projects. The state and local component offers 50:50 matching funds (which in Montana can be up to \$75,000).

LWCF-funded projects need to be sponsored by a city, town, county, school district, state agency, or tribal government. But anyone—citizen, club, neighborhood group—can propose a project.

"Project ideas can originate from anyone, as long as the official grant application comes from a political subdivision of the state willing to sponsor the project," says Timmerman.

Money for the LWCF, which is derived mainly from federal royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling leases, is appropriated each year by Congress. Depending on the mood of congressional leaders, the LWCF can receive a lot of money—\$900 million annually during the 1980s—or nothing, such as during the period from 1995 to 1999, when Congress approved no LWCF funding for state or local projects.

"Those were some tough times," says Timmerman. "We don't want to go back there."

Quality of life issue

The loss of LWCF money is especially hard on local communities struggling to build basic amenities such as playgrounds or picnic grounds. For example, Butte city officials say the recent renovation of Stodden Park could not have been completed without the nearly \$75,000 the city got from its LWCF grant.

"The park's sidewalks, crosswalks, and restrooms are now completely handicap-accessible," says Jennifer Kerns, a spokesperson for the Butte Public Works Department. "We were also able to resurface the basketball court and put in new barbecue pits, picnic tables, and playground equipment."

The 116-acre park also includes a golf course, swimming pool, horseshoe pits, tennis courts, softball fields, veterans' memorial, and amphitheater. "We've tried to make Stodden Park fit the needs of all ages," says Kerns. "I hate to sound corny, but it's every-

body's park. And the LWCF helps keep it that way."

In Bozeman, an LWCF-financed park is just getting off the ground. After "folgers" (Frisbee golfers) were banned from Lindley Park for damaging trees and interfering with other park users, they worked with the city to build a folf course on donated land. In addition to the LWCF funds, the new Rose Park is being built with \$500,000 worth of donated fill and topsoil from a local construction and landscaping company.

"Rose Park will be a flagship disc golf park for the whole northwestern United States," says Craig Sward, a member of the local nonprofit group that is spearheading the effort. "It will be a disc golf community course with a miniature youth disc golf course designed around a picnic ground."

Not all LWCF grants go toward such grand amenities. A few years ago, Highwood day care provider Dorothy Forder worried that the playground equipment in the town's tiny community park was unsafe.

"The slide was old and too high, and it didn't even have a platform on the top," she says. "It was dangerous for little kids."

Forder took it upon herself to meet with Chouteau County officials to see what could be done. "When they told me what new equipment would cost, I thought, 'Oh, my gosh. That's a lot of money.'"

So Forder and other local citizens formed the Highwood Recreational Development Organization and worked with school and city officials to apply for LWCF matching funds. Timmerman recalls visiting the park in 2002 to see if the request had merit.

"School officials had said they needed new playground equipment because kids were actually getting hurt," he says. "So I went up there to look at the existing facilities. As I

Both Sam Curtis, a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors, and photojournalist Erik Peterson live in Bozeman.



THE SWING SET Families have been enjoying the new LWCF-funded playground, biking trails, picnic areas, and other renovations to Butte's popular Stodden Park.

was walking around, I happened to see a boy with his arm in a cast. I asked him how he'd

“I asked him how he'd hurt himself, and he told me he'd fallen off the slide. I couldn't believe it.”

—WALT TIMMERMAN, *Montana FWP*

hurt himself, and he told me he'd fallen off the slide. I couldn't believe it.”

Needless to say, Timmerman okayed the grant, allowing the school to replace the aging playground equipment, landscape the park, add a garden, and install handicap-accessible walkways, benches, and picnic tables.

"We had our all-school reunion at the park this year," says Forder, "and everybody was absolutely flabbergasted at how beautiful it looked."

Timmerman says local residents often volunteer to carry out local projects. "When a

town gets a grant," he says, "there's an awful lot of work done by local individuals and groups to make sure the project gets done."

In Twin Bridges, for example, residents laid sod for a new LWCF-funded ball field.

Timmerman adds that in small rural towns, a little bit of money can go a long way. Terry made good use of \$5,300 for a new town playground. And Winnett used its \$2,000 grant for a park sprinkler system. "In a town that size, an extra \$2,000 can make the difference between getting the job done or going without," Timmerman says.

Sidney has been relying on LWCF funds for decades, says Terry Meldahl, public works director. "We've developed softball fields, football fields, parks, all kinds of things since the 1960s using this fund," he says. "As part of the grant, we always put up a sign that says 'Land and Water Conservation Fund.' But to be honest, I don't think anybody knows what it means."

The annual funding fight

That worries Meldahl, Timmerman, and others who know that LWCF funds help local communities, big and small. Though Montana's congressional delegation has long supported the LWCF, Timmerman suspects many others in Congress only associate parks with leisure or frivolous pursuits.

"I don't believe they comprehend how important a park can be to the health and well-being of a community," Timmerman says. "And I don't think many congressional leaders have seen how a little bit of money allows folks to leverage a whole project in their town."

Parks projects can also generate tourism dollars for local economies, he adds. "What it really gets down to is that the fund boosts the quality of life in towns across the country. That's not very well understood."

That lack of understanding was evident recently when President George W. Bush proposed eliminating the LWCF from the

2006 budget and the House agreed with his idea. Fortunately, Montana Senator Conrad Burns, chairman of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, helped secure \$30 million in appropriations. Of that, says Timmerman, Montana should receive roughly \$250,000.

Unfortunately, that's just a fraction of the annual appropriations Congress authorized two decades ago. Timmerman says the ongoing funding deficiencies have created a backlog of projects waiting for LWCF grants. "There's a huge unmet need out there," he says. In 2002, FWP surveyed Montana's recreational facility managers to find out what it would cost to upgrade, purchase, and build essential outdoor recreational facilities across the state. The answer: more than \$260 million.

In recent years, the nonprofit Americans for Our Heritage and Recreation, which calls itself the "Guardians of the Land and Water Conservation Fund," has lobbied Congress to restore funding to 1980s levels. Despite the group's efforts, however, the LWCF continues to be targeted by lawmakers who consider government spending on such programs to be a waste of taxpayer dollars.

"The problem is that too many elected officials in Washington don't hear from their constituents on matters like this," says Timmerman. "If everyone in the United States who uses LWCF-supported tennis courts, swimming pools, picnic areas, nature trails, and softball fields let Congress know how important these facilities are to them, there wouldn't be a funding problem. But as long as people don't know the fund exists, and that it's benefiting the quality of life in communities across America, I'm afraid it has a good chance of being completely eliminated." 🐾

Though funding for LWCF projects in Montana remains tight, there may still be funds available from the 2006 appropriation. To learn more about the application process, project selection criteria, and application deadlines, contact Walt Timmerman at (406) 444-3753; wtimmerman@mt.gov.

DOG DAY AFTERNOON Each Labor Day, dogs can take a dip in Bozeman's Bogart Park pool. But the era of federally supported local facilities like this one may be coming to an end.

