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Guest Columnist: State needs building materials to capture economic stimulus funding

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State and federal lawmakers are working to pass massive stimulus packages designed to jump-start our economy. President Barack Obama and Gov. Chris Gregoire are pushing to expedite these projects to put people back to work quickly.

A key element of these plans is funding public works projects, which will create high-paying construction jobs and make badly needed progress to rebuild and replace our roads, bridges and buildings.

Washington must have "shovel-ready" projects to attract some of these construction funds. Therefore, we must have economically and environmentally sound sources of vital building materials.

Glacier Northwest's Maury Island facility is the source of the sand and gravel vital to virtually every construction project in the state. To earn all the permits and approvals needed to build a new barge loading dock at its Maury Island mine, Glacier Northwest engaged in more than 10 years of intensive environmental study and permitting review by local, state and federal agencies.

After this unprecedented political, environmental and regulatory scrutiny, the project won approvals from all the necessary agencies. Despite this, there have been multiple unsuccessful attempts to stop this project using legal and political means. Project opponents are mounting protests at the Maury Island site to stop the project.

Their actions and accusations of environmental danger are drawing some unfortunate media attention. There is overwhelming evidence that mitigation measures and permit conditions will protect the environment while the dock is built and when sand and gravel is transported to the construction projects where it is badly needed.

"As we have already ruled, substantial evidence supports the [Shorelines Hearings] Board's conclusion that its conditions, combined with Glacier's mitigation measures, minimize the adverse impact on aquatic habitat and prevent substantial degradation of the area's existing character," according to a unanimous state Court of Appeals ruling in 2006. This ruling upheld a unanimous decision by the SHB ordering King County to grant shoreline permits to build the dock.

In fact, without exception, and after full reviews of all the environmental issues, every local, state and federal agency, administrative body and court to review the project has unanimously concluded that construction and operation of the dock will not harm Puget Sound, near shore habitat or any endangered or threatened species.

The Department of Natural Resources and former Commissioner of Public Lands Doug Sutherland have both come under particularly harsh criticism for leasing Glacier state-owned aquatic lands. For more than 10 years, the department's experienced professional scientists and staff reviewed the lease, the environmental studies, the applicable regulations and the mitigation measures and permit conditions before recommending the lease be approved.

The lease complies with the law and all the environmental protection rules and regulations. It also imposes significant additional requirements for environmental monitoring and mitigation.

Project opponents have twice failed to convince state and federal courts to grant injunctions to stop construction. Requests for the governor and attorney general to overturn the lease should also be rejected.

Washington businesses are struggling during these tough economic times. People need jobs and we all need better roads. Businesses need certainty and they could easily be discouraged and lose faith if opponents are allowed to stop approved projects.

It is time to go on with the job of providing construction materials so we can put stimulus dollars to work immediately.

Don C. Brunell is president of Association of Washington Business.

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