



Friends Receives \$297K from Payroll Protection Plan

Following the COVID-19 shutdown, Friends' revenues dropped precipitously and a loan from the Payroll Protection Program provided a buffer to prevent drastic cuts.

Like numerous nonprofit organizations across the United States, March 2020 was a month of dramatic upheaval for Friends of the Columbia Gorge. Our offices, as well as our land trust preserves, were closed. Our guided hikes were cancelled. Our staff began working remotely, revenue projections looked bleak, and we collectively wrestled with what we could do to continue protecting, preserving and stewarding the Columbia Gorge. All around us, nonprofit organizations were laying off staff, gutting vital services and programming, or mandating significant pay cuts.

At the same time, many of the core conservation challenges that Friends works on have continued and in some cases increased. The demands of responsibly managing just over 1,000 acres in the Gorge has continued for our land trust staff. Key cases our legal team has worked on for years continue to move through the courts. And the shuttering of Gorge trails has created a host of challenges that Friends staff have worked with partners to address.

During the tumultuous times of the Great Recession of 2008-09 our organization buckled down but did not lay off staff. As a result we achieved some of our greatest conservation victories in 2011 and 2012. Building off this model, Friends buckled down at the start of the coronavirus pandemic and pivoted to a new way of working and connecting with our members. Face-to-face contact was replaced with phone calls and Zoom webinars. Expenses were cut, including the executive director voluntarily taking a 20% pay cut for the months of May and June. And plans were considered for deeper budget cuts and reductions in programming and staff pay.

After extensive consultation with board leadership, we chose this spring not to institute staff cuts, as we had spent prudently over the previous nine months. Combined with other budget cuts this savings would allow Friends to carryforward vital funds into our next fiscal year (starting July 2020). But April revenues showed the full impact of the shutdown as fundraising dropped 40%, which projected over 12 months would have

resulted in a \$750,000 drop in income. Action was needed to stave off potentially devastating staff cuts in coming months and Friends staff moved quickly to apply to the newly created federal Payroll Protection Plan.

Like many organizations we were unable to be considered in the first round of applications for the Payroll Protection Plan. In early May 2020, Friends received a \$297,200 loan from the Payroll Protection Fund in their second round of funding. The loan gave the board and staff the confidence to continue to move forward with a reduced budget but intact staff.

What Friends has done with our Payroll Protection funds

With the assurance of the Payroll Protection funds, staff were able to focus on the work of protecting, preserving and stewarding the Columbia Gorge. This work includes:

- Hosting wildlife webinars (pikas, bees and Western pond turtles that were viewed by over 1,000 people;
- Transferring a 160-acre property to U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, allowing a 900-acre salmon-restoration project to begin in the Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge this summer;
- Advocating to the Columbia River Gorge Commission and U.S. Forest Service to include a Climate Resilience Plan in the revised Management Plan for the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area;
- Launching a Haiku challenge that was championed by Oregon's 2019 poet laureate Kim Stafford generated over 230 haikus;
- Reimagining our public and land trust land stewardship to accommodate social distancing and safety for our volunteers; and
- Collaborating with federal and state entities, local non-profits and businesses to create the Columbia Gorge Stewardship Network

Fortunately, our fundraising income for May and June moved back into more solid financial territory but we continue to budget cautiously for the coming year as we are preparing for future waves of uncertainty and potential income decline. Fortunately, that uncertainty has been softened with the receipt of the Payroll Protection loan and our financial health is sound for the time being.

In these uncertain times, Friends' board, led by its Finance Committee, will work to ensure that the organization remain wise stewards with its funds as it works to protect, preserve and steward the Columbia Gorge.