

BTC seeks funds for new hatchery facility

Fisheries technology building in disrepair

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THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM — Earl Steele thought someone was playing a prank on him when all the chairs in his classroom at the fish hatchery on Whatcom Creek were repeatedly on the far side of the room when he arrived in the morning.

Then he realized the law of gravity was pulling the prank — the computer chairs were rolling across a floor that had developed a slant because the building was sinking.

A slanted second floor is only one of the structural problems plaguing the home of the Bellingham Technical College Fisheries Technology Program. A leaking roof, seismic instability, outdated electrical systems and inadequate program and storage space round out the list.

Because of the dismal state of the building, the college is starting a \$2 million fundraising campaign for a new facility at the hatchery.

“At some point, we need to vacate the building because it’s not safe,” said Patricia McKeown, vice president of instruction at BTC. “In order for the program to survive, we need a new building.”

If the college can raise the money by July 2009, it will receive \$2 million in state matching funds to cover the full cost of the proposed project.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Thousands of people fish Whatcom Creek and thousands of students join with Bellingham Parks and Recreation for field trips each year, but few people realize Bellingham Technical College is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the hatchery and its eggs.

“We’re Bellingham’s best-kept secret,” joked Steele, the director since the program’s beginning. “Bellingham Parks and Rec runs tours, but they’re touring what we’re doing.”

The fisheries program was started in 1979 after a wastewater treatment plant was converted into the fish hatchery. Students in the two-year program spawn, monitor and release salmon and eggs into creeks across Whatcom and Skagit counties.

When the program started, Whatcom Creek was a “dead creek” without a natural fish run, Steele said. But the hatchery and fisheries program has brought back salmon to Whatcom Creek, as well as helped restore wild salmon runs in Terrell, Squalicum and Oyster creeks.



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Bellingham Technical College fisheries technology student Carla Sherman holds a sample of chum salmon fry from hatching trays before moving the fish to holding ponds last Monday.

Students run the day-to-day operations of the hatchery, with oversight and approval from the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

But the program isn’t just to train hatchery workers for Whatcom Creek. The curriculum includes restoration and monitoring of creeks, streams and tributaries all over Whatcom and Skagit counties, as well as hands-on work at an acre of oyster and clam ground in Samish Bay.

Steele usually has about 25 students each year in various stages of the program, and graduates can find jobs with state, federal or private hatcheries, research groups, organizations that do habitat restoration, shellfish farms, water quality agencies and more.

“Right now there are so many jobs available, it’s mind-boggling,” Steele said.

BUILDING WOES

The current building was built in the 1940s as the wastewater plant control building. There has been at least one addition for extra space for hatchery trays, but little structural work has been done on the building since it was remodeled for the BTC program in the 1970s, Steele said.

The city of Bellingham owns the building and land and leases them to BTC, McKeown said. The city doesn't want to pay for a new building, but the program can't relocate.

"In order for this program to operate, we need to operate adjacent to the stream," McKeown said. "Pulling away from here is not possible."

Because the college doesn't own the land, the state won't fund the whole project. But by receiving state matching funds and signing a long-term lease with the city, BTC can stay at the location.

The planned facility, called the NW Center of Environmental, Fisheries & Aquaculture, will allow the program to expand in enrollment and scope.

"Fisheries and maintaining our natural resources is more of a growing field than a declining one," McKeown said. "It would be a really big loss for this community, this park, for this fishing access to not be available."

HOW TO DONATE

To donate money for Bellingham Technical College's proposed NW Center of Environmental, Fisheries & Aquaculture, contact Mary Humphries, executive director of the BTC Foundation, at 752- 8378.

For more information about the foundation, go to www.btc.ctc.edu and click on the "BTC Foundation" link.

LEARN MORE

For more information about the Fisheries Technology Program, go to www.btc.ctc.edu, click on the "Degree and Certificate Programs" link, and then click on the "Fisheries Technology" link.