

HOW DID WE GET HERE? THE CAMA BEACH STORY; FROM THE PARK ACQUISITION AND OPENING TO THE CLOSING OF PUBLIC ACCOMMODATIONS

1. Washington State Parks acquires the old Cama Beach resort property through legislative appropriations and a gift from the resort owners of almost 60% of the appraised value

From 1934 until 1989, the original Cama Beach fishing resort was one of many old style saltwater fishing and beach resorts on Puget Sound. Families of modest means could rent a beach cabin to enjoy fishing, crabbing, beach combing, swimming, water sports, and all the bounties of Puget Sound. By the time the private resort at Cama Beach closed in 1989, it was the very last of such beach and fishing resorts still operating on Puget Sound. Sandra Worthington and Karen Hamalainen inherited the old resort from their parents, long time resort operators/owners Muriel and Lee Risk; who had inherited from the original resort founder, Muriel Risk's father, Seattle businessman L.R. Stradley.

While these two succeeding families could no longer operate Cama Beach as a private beach resort, it was of critical importance to the daughters and their husbands and their families' legacy that Cama Beach not be subdivided, developed and sold off. Instead, the families' vision was to preserve the beach resort property and historic public accommodations by making a transition into public ownership. Foregoing the opportunity to sell off the property to private interests and realize millions of dollars in profit, in 1990 the families approached the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission (WSPRC) with an extraordinary offer.

The terms of the extraordinarily generous offer the Cama Beach resort owners made to WSPRC was this: In order to preserve the 450 acre property of upland forest and 1.2 miles of pristine salt water beach, and continue to allow affordable public accommodations in the historic beach cabins and related buildings, the families offered to make a gift to State Parks of at least one-half of the appraised value of the property and historic buildings, plus contribute significant sums out of the purchase price to pay for park planning and development. In exchange for this generous offer which included a total gift exceeding \$12,000,000, WSPRC would be obligated to protect the historic

buildings, and operate the property as a new State Park including a continuation of beach accommodations for the public.

After much internal discussion, State Parks accepted the families' offer fully recognizing that the new Cama Beach State Park with its historic buildings and affordable public accommodations would be a totally unique park continuing in the tradition of the old Cama Beach Resort. WSPRC understood and embraced the families' vision to maintain the historic resort beach cabins and resort buildings recognizing the enormous public benefits of preserving the property and maintaining the historic public accommodations.



In addition, the two families also made cash donations to further reduce the amount of public money required. Even still, the amount required from the State's public funds was substantial, and so State Parks proposed, and the families accepted that the Cama Beach acquisitions would need to be phased over several state budget cycles. Ultimately, the acquisition process took place over four State two-year budget cycles from 1992-2000. In each budget cycle, Parks would propose legislative funding of individual land parcels, and the family would gift other parcels of the property of equal or greater value. Ultimately, the two seller families donated to State Parks resort properties valued at \$9,823,000, which equals 59.6% of the entire property appraised value of \$16,491,000, which is

believed to be the largest dollar gift to State Parks in the history of the State of Washington.

2. The acquisition and development of the Cama Beach Historical State Park took eighteen years, and the selling families make further cash gifts of almost \$2,500,000.

In addition to preserving the historic buildings for public use, the development of Cama Beach was complex involving construction of new roads, parking areas, utilities, renovation of the cabins and other larger historic buildings plus some new facilities. Planning included a new small conference hotel (never built) and a new Cama Hall which included a café and provided much-needed public meeting spaces.

To operate the historic Cama Beach boat house, a new partnership was established between WSPRC and the Seattle based non-profit Center for Wooden Boats under which the Center would maintain and rent out a variety of watercraft for fishing, crabbing, kayaking and boating. To guide the new Park's development, a master planning process was initiated and completed with a gift of over \$200,000 from the two resort owner families. Further, they contributed an additional \$2,235,000 in cash towards what ultimately became the Cama Center.

During the early excavation and construction work, native artifacts and four Native American burial remains were discovered in the lower park area. Under both state and federal law, careful measures were required to preserve and protect the native burial remains and artifacts in consultation with several Puget Sound native tribes. The State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation became involved, and the state contracted with Cascadia Archaeology to complete an archeological investigation and study of the Cama Beach site which took 2 years to complete and cost over \$2,500,000. Further excavation and development work on the new park was suspended until the archeological study was completed.

The result of the archeological investigation and study concluded that no historical native village had existed, nor was the area typical for established burial grounds. Instead, the State's archeologist reported that Cama Beach had been a "late prehistoric shell midden that appears to have been a seasonal fishing and shellfish collecting camp" which was used by several different Puget Sound tribes.

As a result of these findings, the Park was redesigned to minimize impacts on the cultural site including relocation of the new proposed Commons/Dining building to a new site above the beach and historic midden. In consultation with the tribes, the four burial remains were reinterred to protected and undisclosed locations. Areas of excavation were undertaken with care and supervision by retained archeologists who recorded their observations and findings.

The study also concluded that no single tribe had occupied the Cama Beach midden, but all the local Puget Sound tribes who were identified as historical users of the site were consulted about the excavation and construction of the park structures and utilities. Since each affected tribe had its own concerns and opinions on the new park, they were not all in agreement. There was some discussion at this time about establishing a native American interpretive center, an idea which Parks supported in principle, but nothing concrete ever materialized.

Ultimately, the Swinomish, Upper Skagit and Stillaguamish tribes were supportive of opening the new Cama Beach Park, while the Tulalip tribe took the position that it alone had an historical right to the Cama Beach property, and that State Parks should give or sell the entire property to them. When State parks refused to do so, the Tulalip sought to block further construction and completion of the new park and filed various lawsuits to do so. However, the Tulalip litigation was unsuccessful, State Parks prevailed, and the Cama Beach State Historical Park was completed over the objections of the Tulalip Tribe whose demand to receive the property has never been withdrawn.

3. The Cama Beach Historical Park was opened to the public in 2008; the historic resort buildings including all public accommodations and beach cabins were temporarily closed on February 26, 2024, and permanently closed on October 10, 2024

From 2008 until February 2023, after the completion of the park Master Plan, the archeological excavation, and a total investment in both public and private money exceeding \$30,000,000, the dream of reopening Cama Beach to the public was realized. Besides the large investment of funds, the new park was supported by hundreds of volunteers including the Cama Beach Foundation, the Friends of Camano Island Parks, and the Cama Beach Quilters. Recognizing its recent historical importance, Cama Beach Historical State Park and the

archaeological site have been listed on the National Historic Register. And Cama Beach has become extraordinarily popular with the public with more than 250,000 annual visitors while public accommodations were available. In 2023, the last full year of continuous operations, 42 destination weddings were held at Cama Beach State Historical Park. The Stanwood Camano Island area benefited from the opening of the Park. Visitors who stayed in the cabins also bought gas, and groceries on the Island, helped the local economy in many other ways. According to a Park study completed in 2021 visitors to the area spent about 8 Million dollars annually in the Camano Island area. Until the recent closure, Cama Beach was held up as a model of a more entrepreneurial and self-supporting State Park operations.

As part of the development of the new park, State Parks directed contractors to install a new sewage septic system that has had design and operational problems since its inception. For years, instead of responsibly addressing these problems by some permanent fix, State Parks has done patch work fixes and spent multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars pumping sewage away from the resort area. In February 2024, after failure of an electrical panel regulating the septic system, State Parks announced the temporary closure of the beach cabins with no public input.

Earlier, another maintenance failure resulted in a burst water sprinkler pipe inside the historic Boat House leased to the Center for Wooden Boats. Instead of fixing the sprinkler problem for which it was responsible, State Parks decided to terminate the long-standing lease with the Center for Wooden Boats. The large “boat house” building that the Center for Wooden boats utilized since the new Park opened is the largest of the historical buildings that State Parks promised to preserve, and it now sits as an abandoned structure on the beach.

At about the same time, State Parks decided to close the cabins, they also stopped the shuttle service from the parking areas down to the beach and closed all the restroom facilities in the lower park. With no expectation of a normal number of visitors, the old retail store previously operated by the Cama Beach Foundation was closed, and that historic building also sits abandoned beside the 40 plus cabins that State Parks is obligated to preserve. To make matters even worse, the numerous requests made by the Foundation to State Parks for

approval to resume some of the educational programs and beach walks at Cama Beach State Park have been ignored.

In March of 2024 State Park staff met with the public on Camano Island. They provided very little information and answered even fewer questions. In July of 2024, State Parks held a public meeting in Stanwood, ostensibly to obtain public input about the future of Cama Beach, in particular about maintaining the historic buildings and cabins providing public accommodations. The public comments that State Parks received were overwhelmingly in support of reopening the historic beach cabins, including a petition urging State Parks to reopen the beach cabins signed by more than 1500 Park supporters.

Gary Worthington, a family member of the resort owners who donated more than 60% of the land value, plus over \$2,700,000 in cash contributions, wrote a letter to protest State Parks breach of the promises made to his family to preserve the historic buildings and maintain public accommodations and access, like his family's historic resort, which State Parks ignored.



In total defiance of the public input solicited by State Parks, and in defiance of its moral and legal obligations to the historic resort owners who gifted 60% of the property value, on October 10, 2024, the Washington State Parks and Recreation met on the other side of the State in Clarkston, Washington and voted

to permanently close the historic beach cabins at Cama Beach Historical State Park. There was never an opportunity at that meeting for the public to engage with the Parks Commission to ask questions and there is no public appeal process of a Commission decision.

4. The reasons used by State Parks to justify its closure of the historic beach cabins at Cama Beach Historic Park are not substantiated

When State Parks announced the temporary closure of Cama Beach cabins and beach on February 26, 2024, the reasons stated were as follows:

“Significant parts of the septic system recently failed in the impacted area, and the repairs will require extensive disturbance of the ground which has known environmental and cultural complexities.”

Further, on October 10, 2024, when State Parks decided to make the closure of the beach cabins permanent, similar reasons were then cited as follows:

“Significant septic and infrastructure failures led to the closure of the cabins and other buildings in the beach area of park [*sic*] in February 2024. In addition to this issue, the impacts of rising sea levels have damaged buildings in the area. Data shows these impacts will only increase in the coming years. There are also known cultural and historical complexities that impact the sustainability of reopening the cabins.”

To break down the reasons that State Parks claims justified closing the beach cabins, restrooms and other historic resort buildings on the beach, and based on examination of staff reports, there are four reasons behind the decision to close the beach cabins and buildings, each of which is analyzed below:

1. Failure of the septic and other unspecified “infrastructure failures.”
2. The repairs of the septic and other failed infrastructure would require extensive disturbance of the ground which has known environmental and cultural complexities.
3. Rising sea levels (global warming).
4. Tribal concerns.

SEPTIC AND INFRASTRUCTURE FAILURES AND STATE PARKS FALSE
ASSERTION THAT REPAIRS WOULD REQUIRE “EXTENSIVE DISTURBANCE” OF
THE GROUND

The entire sewage septic system at Cama Beach was designed and installed by State Parks after it acquired the old resort property in the early 2000s. And the problems that State Parks cites with the septic system in February 2024 were not new issues, but rather recurrent problems that stemmed from State Parks own malfeasance in incorrectly designing, installing and failing to maintain a suitable and appropriate septic and sewage system. So, the first response to State Parks actions in closing the beach cabins and buildings is that State Parks is hiding behind its own failures and incompetence to make the public pay the price.

Second, the actual immediate breakdown of the system that occurred before February 26, 2024, was the failure of an electrical panel above the beach at the main entrance to the park. The cost to replace this failed electrical component was estimated by Parks personnel at about \$25,000. While it is true that even after this broken electrical panel is fixed, there are other sewage conveyance and septic issues that need a long-term solution, there was no immediate crisis to justify the beach cabins and buildings being closed. As a result of not fixing the septic and sewage system, State Parks has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to pump the septic system and provide temporary restrooms.

Third, State Parks continually insinuates that there is some adverse relationship between the native cultural and burial remnants in the midden (which is on the beach) and the septic and sewage issues which are demonstrably false. There is nothing wrong with the existing pipes and tanks at the beach level, and whatever ground disturbance was involved in their installation was done almost twenty years ago and under the supervision of the State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation and tribal participation.

And even if any of the existing tanks or pipes did require repair or replacement, such activities would only occur in areas of prior excavations. However, the major system works necessary to correct the septic system design and installation work is in the much larger area where the drain fields were installed, which is not only well above the beach but are sited on the other upland side of West Camano Way, the County Road which accesses the Park. Instead of

making this clear, State Parks is deliberately vague about the location of the long-term repairs needed.

Finally, the only other specifically identified infrastructure failure known to exist on the beach level is a small water pipe among the beach cabins in an existing shallow utility trench. This very minor and routine repair could be readily fixed at nominal cost without disturbing any new ground that has not already been excavated.

RISING SEA LEVELS AND THE SEAWALL

Just like everyone else on the planet and other state agencies, State Parks operations will need to address global warming and rising sea levels in the coming years. For instance, many Washingtons State ferry terminals may need to be relocated and/or rebuilt, but unlike the approach by State Parks, the need for such long-term planning has fortunately not resulted in the State closing existing ferry docks before building new facilities.

The existing seawall at Cama Beach is over 50 years old, and unlike the septic system, was not designed and installed by State Parks. When State Parks developed Cama Beach, it elevated the old cabins a few inches and something similar may be required in the future which can be accomplished with no new ground excavations.

While it is accurate that establishing new seawalls is not favored because of adverse environmental impacts, it is not accurate despite some statements by State Parks, that all repairs of the existing seawall at Cama Beach are prohibited. A major advantage of the Cama Beach property is that a mile of shoreline could be left untouched as mitigation, and much of the northern length of the seawall itself is already protected by a naturally accreted berm of gravel, shells, and logs.

Also, the major weather and king-tide threats at Cama Beach occur in the winter season, which is the off season when demand for the cabins is at its lowest and could be addressed by seasonal closures.

Finally, unless the seawall is repaired and remains in place, the result would be not just be a threat to the cabins and other historic buildings on the beach, but there would likewise be a threat to the entire historic native midden and all of its historical artifacts and cultural significance.

Finally, WSPRC's failure to undertake periodic repairs to the seawall instead of allowing its continued deterioration is another example of State Parks using its own management failures to escape its obligations to the public and the previous resort owners.

TRIBAL CONCERNS

In the early development of Cama Beach State Historical Park, it is safe to say that WSPRC should have been done a better reaching out earlier and consulting with the local Native American tribes who had a strong interest and historical connection to the site. While one tribe among four filed and pursued litigation that threatened to stop the Park's development, that goal was not widely shared by most of the interested tribes.

In fact, at the public ceremony to celebrate the opening of the new park, representatives of three local tribes participated in the ceremony, and one generously roasted salmon for all to enjoy.

More recently, State Parks has suggested that tribal opposition to the needed park infrastructure repairs was a significant obstacle, but the federal and state statutes and regulations applicable to the needed park repairs are basically the same today as when the Park opened in 2008.

As a matter of common sense, there is obviously far less impact in digging up a shallow utility trench to repair a water main than there was when the utility trench was originally excavated. While the interested local tribes are certainly entitled to be consulted and take whatever positions they deem to be appropriate, no one single tribe has veto power over what the State determines to do with the established and developed Park in which the public has invested tens of millions of dollars.