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City Council FYI: Land and Water Conservation Fund

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For Steamboat Pilot & Today

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The COVID-19 pandemic. How will we look back on this? What will we remember?

I hope we will forget the trivial parts of the pandemic, like wearing masks to the grocery store and standing 6 feet apart. What we should instead look back on are the things that got us through.

Because this is Steamboat Springs, I'll bet 99% of you would say that outdoor recreation got you through. Even though most of our parks and public lands were closed, we all found somewhere to go to connect with the outdoors. Thank you to the city of Steamboat Springs for being part of that solution and keeping the Howelsen Hill Nordic trails open.

This local treasure is the oldest continually operating ski area in North America. And we have maintained and improved it with support from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

But developed parks aren't the only things the fund supports. In 2013, one of the Fund's acquisition was the 920-acre Cross Mountain Ranch on the Yampa River. Previously locked in by private property, the ranch is now open to hunters, anglers, boaters, hikers and other outdoor recreationists thanks to funding. The ranch includes 2.8 miles of frontage on the Yampa and provides habitat to 400 elk, mule deer and all four species of Colorado warm water fish.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund was enacted by Congress in 1965 to help preserve, develop and ensure access to outdoor recreation facilities to strengthen the health of U.S. citizens. Up to \$900 million annually was authorized for the Fund with monies coming from revenues from offshore oil and gas leasing. But it received full annual funding only once in its history.

Advocates for the Fund scored a big victory in 2019, when permanent authorization of Conservation Fund was secured as part of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act. Next up? To secure permanent full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund — ensuring that each year the \$900 million deposited into the Fund account goes towards conservation and recreation priorities. Over the 55 years of the program, more than \$22 billion has been diverted from the Fund to other purposes.

The bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act might be the answer. In addition to permanently funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the act seeks to address the maintenance backlog in our parks. We owe a debt of gratitude to Colorado's Sens. Michael Bennet and Cory Gardner who co-sponsored the bill and who have ensured it will get a vote in both the Senate and House before the end of June.

The act has gained widespread support from the outdoor recreation industry, which, according to the Outdoor Industry Association, generates \$28 billion in consumer spending in Colorado and supports 229,000 jobs. Those jobs generate \$9.7 billion in wages and salaries. The industry also contributes \$2 billion annually in state and local tax revenue. Despite organized opposition from the livestock industry, it is anticipated that President Donald Trump will sign it.

After decades of advocating for full and permanent funding for the Fund, passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, will be a silver lining in the COVID-19 cloud for me, and the 2.2 million people who hunt, fish or enjoy wildlife-watching in Colorado. Let's look back on this time and remember these silver linings.

Sonja Macys is the District III representative on Steamboat Springs City Council.