

Parks department wins national Army Corps award



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SWEET HOME — U.S. Army Corps of Engineers staff from across the nation were on hand Tuesday afternoon at the Sweet Home Community Center to honor the Linn County Parks and Recreation Department with its 2013 National Excellence in Partnerships Award.

Accepting the award was the parks director, Brian Carroll.

“This is a really special day,” said Mary Coulombe, Chief of Natural Resources for the Corps, based in Washington, D.C. “The Corps is the largest federal recreation provider, with 370 million visitor days on our 422 lakes and reservoirs, and 12 million acres of land and water.”

Coulombe, a Portland native, said Linn County faced stiff competition but stood out because of three key accomplishments:

- The work the county parks staff has done gathering information about the Quartzville corridor and developing recreation plans to expand county camping opportunities in the face of closure of dispersed camping areas by the Corps.
- Working in conjunction with the Linn County Road Department to secure a \$6.2 million Federal Lands Access Program grant to make improvements to the corridor itself.

“Without good roads, we cannot get people out to our recreation areas,” Coulombe said.

- The county’s willingness to develop working partnerships not only with the Corps of Engineers, but also with other agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and the community of Sweet Home.

“There are several members of our national partnerships team here today, and they will take the stories they hear and spread them around the country,” Coulombe said.

Debby Chenowith of the Corps Foundation started with the Corps of Engineers 42 years ago but said, “we weren’t very good partners.”

But a lot has changed and Linn County has kept its eye on the target.

“We have come such a long way,” Chenowith said. “This partnership is a sterling example of what all should strive for.”

Dustin Bengsten, Willamette Valley Project operations manager, said he has spent the last 20 of his 24 years with the Corps in the mid-valley.

“I believe we’ve come a long way because of perseverance, patience and perspective,” Bengsten said. “Our vision has changed and we have come to a community understanding in managing public resources. We got there because everyone was patient.”

Bengsten said that years ago, “It was difficult to do business with us at times.”

But, he said, because the county and staff like Brian Carroll have kept their eye on the big picture, the partnership has grown, even during difficult budget times.

Roger Nyquist, chairman of the Linn County Board of Commissioners, said “It is a proud moment for all citizens of Linn County.”

He said the county’s road and GIS departments are often called on to help make the parks department projects happen and “they never say no.”

Carroll said the partnership has “come a long way,” and yes, there had been several “rocky times,” but the partnership is now strong and growing.

“The Quartzville project is just the beginning,” Carroll said. “The commissioners have supported our department through tough times, and we believe we have to keep moving forward or we’ll fall backwards.”

Carroll said the parks department has only 11 full-time staff members, “so we have to have partners such as the Corps of Engineers, BLM and U.S. Forest Service. They help us accomplish our mission to provide a diversity of recreational opportunities, a higher quality of life and public safety.”

Criteria for the award was: creativity and originality; improvement in public awareness; public education; accomplishment of management objectives; involving other partners; and serving diverse audiences.

Linn County Parks and Recreation manages 22 parks, including Sunnyside Campground, Lewis Creek day use area, Gedney Creek boat ramp, Sunnyside boat ramp and Calkins Point boat ramp on Foster Reservoir; and boat ramps and camping on Green Peter Reservoir.

The county also recently purchased the a campground and marina on the southwest corner of Foster Reservoir.