

## An Affront to Astronomy, Embarrassment for Washington

<https://www.darkskydefenders.org/blog/an-affront-to-astronomy-embarrassment-for-washington>

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Being designated as a Dark Sky Park requires “*active participation in ongoing efforts to garner robust community support for dark sky protection*” and that “*participants serve as a beacon in their community for stewardship and passionate advocacy for the night sky.*” After decades of non-protection, the Goldendale Observatory State Park is in even greater need of “passionate advocacy” for the safeguarding of its increasingly vulnerable night sky vistas. **Washington State Parks has shown it is not up to the task.**

As an amateur astronomer I thought I’d made a prudent choice to live near the small town of Goldendale, in Klickitat County, Washington. Home to a famous observatory, it had some of the country’s first lighting codes to protect the night sky, and was the sixth International Dark Sky Park awarded this prestigious designation by the International Dark Sky Association (IDA). Where better in the Pacific Northwest to pursue an interest in astronomy? Unfortunately, after becoming involved with the Goldendale Observatory State Park, I learned too late about the reality of small town politics and bureaucratic mismanagement.

To persuade the amateur astronomers who built the massive telescope – and the community college that paid for it – to locate it in Goldendale, the city promised to build an Observatory to house the telescope, and adopt lighting regulations to protect it. These regulations were enacted by Goldendale and Klickitat County in 1979, but have remained largely unknown to the public, and are rarely enforced. The promise to protect the telescope’s night sky seems to have amounted to little more than a “bait and switch” to acquire the prized telescope in order to lure tourists to an economically challenged rural area.

Washington taxpayers, who purchased the Observatory in 1980, are about to spend 5.8 million dollars on the Goldendale Observatory State Park for building expansion and more parking. Although a worthy endeavor given the facility’s age, the status of the acclaimed International Dark Sky Park has been under the radar since being suspended by the IDA in late 2016. Thanks to public disclosure requests made to Washington State Parks by a local radio station, the final result of that suspension is now known.

The Goldendale Observatory was decertified by the IDA as a Dark Sky Park in September 2017 – the first and only such revocation to ever take place – and a true “black eye” for Goldendale, Klickitat County, and Washington State. Given decades of delinquency in lighting code enforcement, there has been little evidence of real dark sky protection efforts in the local community. More disturbing, the IDA found that current Goldendale Observatory State Park personnel showed virtually no appreciation for, or interest in maintaining, this coveted status, and failed to advocate for protection of the Observatory’s starry night sky. This would be surprising for a nature park or preserve which also highlights a beautiful night sky. For a publicly owned astronomical telescope that requires a dark night sky, as well as an observatory promoting itself as “famous for its dark skies,” it’s unbelievable.

Goldendale and Klickitat County promised to protect the Observatory’s night sky, but for decades neglected to implement such protection. Washington State Parks promises to provide stewardship for the State’s natural heritage for future generations, yet an observatory needing protection of its dark sky “vulnerable natural resource” – apparently doesn’t merit such stewardship. Concern for protecting increasingly rare star-filled skies – and associated ecotourism – has grown worldwide in recent years. However, given the choice between

advocating for protecting the Observatory's night sky or remaining silent, Washington State Parks, in alliance with the Goldendale Chamber of Commerce, appears completely uninterested in protecting the taxpayer's substantial investment in an observatory of "international importance" if it means even a minor inconvenience for some in the local community who only wish to see the Observatory exploited for tourism. Just keep spending millions of taxpayer dollars directly benefiting these interests – which they seem to believe they're entitled to without obligation – and they'll happily allow the continued despoiling of the Observatory's night sky.

A Dark Sky Park designation is an ongoing privilege that needs to be earned. The longstanding lack of genuine concern for the Observatory's night sky by Goldendale and Klickitat County, combined with the Observatory's newfound lack of real interest in protecting its "perfect for stargazing" night sky, shows they were not deserving of the prestigious honor of being home to an International Dark Sky Park. The astronomy community as well as those who truly care about protecting our increasingly threatened pristine views of the cosmos for future generations can be thankful the IDA appropriately defended the credibility of its highly esteemed Dark-Sky Places program by decertifying the Goldendale Observatory as an International Dark Sky Park.

[https://www.washingtontimes.com/multimedia/image/ap\\_361aacdc29685431680f6a7067002d6djpg/](https://www.washingtontimes.com/multimedia/image/ap_361aacdc29685431680f6a7067002d6djpg/)

***"Light pollution from Goldendale, Wash. floods the sky on a cloudy night at the Goldendale Observatory State Park on Tuesday, Dec 9, 2014. The observatory, run by the Washington State Parks, is a dark sky destination for people from around the region, and is the only public observatory in the Northwest."***

Yakima Herald, Photo: Mason Trinca

**Revealing details here:**

<https://www.darkskydefenders.org/abandoned.html>

Bob Yoesle  
Goldendale, WA