

Parks in Peril

01.2012 | BUDGET | 31

Across the country, recreation areas are being hit hard by state budget cuts.



Homolovi State Park in Arizona has faced periodic closing because of budget problems.

PHOTO: ARIZONA STATE PARKS

BY DOUGLAS SHINKLE

Visitors hoping to get some R&R at their favorite state parks last summer may have found the gates padlocked, the restrooms closed and the docks removed.

No function of state government may be feeling the pinch of tough times as much as state parks, even though they make up less than 0.3 percent of all state budget expenditures. The grim news on state park funding comes from across the country.

California closed 70 state parks. Arizona eliminated all state funding for parks. Colorado reduced its parks budget by \$3 million, Georgia by \$10 million, and Massachusetts by \$23 million.

The cutbacks affect a broad cross-section of citizens and may be one of the most visible ways people feel the pain of deep cuts in state budgets. They come at time when the use of parks is at an all-time high, attracting families looking for nearby, affordable vacation and recreation options. Visits to America's 7,000 plus state parks increased by 14 million between 2009 and 2010 to 741 million.

An analysis by Virginia's State Parks found annual visitor spending is about \$18 billion nationally. Spending on parks for capital expenditures and operating budgets amounts to an additional \$3 billion. And parks provide jobs. Maintaining state parks requires some 270,000 employees; another 319,000 jobs are pegged to parks' capital expenditures and operating budgets.

No Help From D.C.

Phil McNelly, executive director of the National Association of State Park Directors, says that, unlike many other programs, state parks do not have a dedicated federal match, making them more susceptible to budget

Douglas Shinkle tracks state park and conservation issues for NCSL.

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cuts. A few federal programs have aided parks, but those, too, are in serious jeopardy of being slashed. The Land and Water Conservation Fund has been consistently underfunded, and the Department of Transportation's Recreational Trails program has been targeted for possible elimination in recent budget talks. Federal money typically is allocated for acquiring land, not for the daily operations and maintenance of parks.

States have attempted a dizzying array of tactics to keep parks open during the past few legislative sessions. Some have had a dedicated funding stream for more than 20 years, although it doesn't typically pay for all operations. Colorado and Oregon have funded their state parks partially through state lotteries. Arkansas and Missouri have dedicated a portion of the sales tax since 1996 and 1984, respectively. Texas uses a sales tax on sporting goods to help fund parks.

None of these sources, however, can pay for all the costs associated with state parks. Although revenues from park admission fees, camping fees, golf course charges and restaurants can help fill the gaps, outside of certain very popular parks, they are not enough to make parks self-sustaining.

Looking at Fees

To help support their parks, Montana lawmakers created a park "passport" in 2003 that added an optional fee to vehicle registrations, allowing car own-

A mother and son camp last summer at a Montana state park.

PHOTO: MONTANA STATE PARKS



“The time couldn’t be worse for reducing services at parks. With economic pressures and family stress over budgets, we’re talking about taking away the close-to-home opportunities to get outdoors and relieve some of that pressure.”

—Phil McKnelly, executive director of the National Association of State Park Directors

ers unlimited admission to any state park for a year. During the 2011 session, lawmakers raised the \$4 fee to \$6, but added the option to opt out of the passport “for life.” Around 80 percent of Montanans chose to pay the fee in 2008, which generated about \$3.2 million. About 88 percent of all state park visitors that year purchased the passport.

“Parks are critical to Montana’s brand,” says Montana Senator Ryan Zinke. “When people hear Montana, they think about wide-open spaces, clean air, clean water, the last best place. Our parks do a tremendous job of promoting that image.”

Chas Van Genderen, administrator for Montana state parks, says the strength of the license fee is that it draws money from a large base of citizens, and the vast majority of state park visitors drive there.

Michigan legislators also created a park passport. For \$10, Michiganders have unlimited admission to all state parks, recreation areas and boat launches for a year. California voters, however, rejected a similar concept on a ballot measure in 2010. Washington, which previously did not charge an entrance fee to any of its parks, created a \$30 annual “Discover Pass” this year. Lawmakers set the day-pass fee at a comparatively high \$10, giving visitors an incentive to buy the annual pass.

Exploring Partnerships

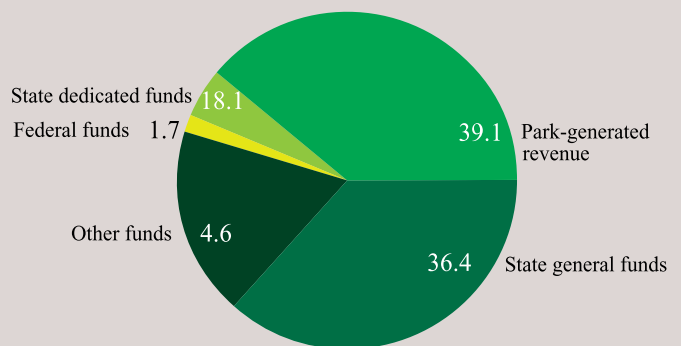
A few states have explored the possibility of corporate sponsorships. In Virginia, several fitness trails have been finished through volunteer and monetary donations from Dominion Power, one of the main energy providers in the state. Touch-screen stations at all state parks, available around the clock, also were funded by Dominion.

Virginia State Parks Director Joe Elton wants to “create a culture of collaboration and partnership. We’re not asking corporations to fund operations or maintenance; we are looking for specific projects that need enhancement. Cor-



*Senator
Ryan Zinke
Montana*

Average Sources of Funds for State Park Operating Expenses



Sources: Compiled from average of all 50 states. “Statistical Report of State Park Operations: 2009-2010, National Association of State Park Directors.”

porations are not going to bake the cake, but they can put the icing on the cake.”

After budget woes forced seven parks to close in Arizona, the Legislature searched for any entities willing and able to quickly take over and operate them. A few parks are now operated by nonprofit organizations, in cooperation with local governments. Homolovi State Park re-opened thanks to \$175,000 from the Hopi Tribe. The agreement gives the tribe a significant say in the operation of the park, which is a culturally and religiously important site for the tribe. But lawmakers discovered deferred maintenance backlogs make private entities leery of operating parks. Complicating matters further, the state does not own the land where most of the popular recreation parks are located. They are mostly on Forest Service and BLM land.

California, New York and Virginia have looked for partnerships with

businesses—such as North Face, Nestlé, Coca-Cola, Sony and several other national and local businesses—that are interested in increasing their visibility and branding in parks. The companies often receive some kind of recognition. In Virginia, North Face’s logo was added to trailhead signs.

In another partnership in California, three state parks will benefit from shared staffing and management with nearby National Park units. This option, however, is not available to most state parks.”

Drilling Debate

Drilling for oil and gas on state park land also is being discussed in Ohio and Pennsylvania. In Ohio, the General Assembly passed legislation to allow drilling on state lands and created an Oil and Gas Leasing Commission to oversee leasing of land that is owned or controlled by a state agency. Funds from royalties and fees will be used to buy land for more parks and to pay capital expenses.

Some lawmakers, however, are not sure drilling is the answer. “I wish I could say I trust the oil and gas corporations to be environmentally responsible and sustainable in their practices. But I am almost certain that if it is a choice between profitability or enhancing precautions and protection of our natural beauty, industry will choose profits every time,” says Ohio Representative Robert F. Hagan.



*Representative
Robert F. Hagan
Ohio*

But Ohio Representative John Adams, sponsor of the legislation, thinks drilling is a critical step. “Drilling in state parks will help erase the half-a-billion dollar backlog of projects that need to occur right now in our parks,” he says. “This will, in turn, help to keep our parks and our lakes up to the standards the citizens of Ohio want.”



*Representative
John Adams
Ohio*

How to maintain and pay for parks will spark more debate in the years ahead as lawmakers continue to face tough budget decisions. It’s an open question whether state lawmakers will decide that the value of parks to citizens, tourists and local communities outweighs the need for further budget cuts. Innovations at statehouses suggest state parks will remain, but perhaps in a different form.

“The time couldn’t be worse for reducing services at parks,” says McKnelly of the state park directors group. “With economic pressures and family stress over budgets, we’re talking about taking away the close-to-home opportunities to get outdoors and relieve some of that pressure.”