



MICHIGAN REPORT

MACKINAC CENTER CALLS FOR STATE PARK SALES

In keeping with its less government is more philosophy, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy this week called for the sale of as many as 14 state parks. And apparently the Department of Natural Resources is reviewing the idea if not the specific recommendations.

In an article in its fall 2005 Michigan Privatization Report, the Midland-based think tank argued that the state could see an influx of cash and a cut in expenses by selling off some of its state parks with the least natural resources value.

“It was not the intent of the original lawmakers to set aside areas as state parks merely as an alternative to outdoor recreation opportunities provided by the private sector,” said Russ Harding, senior environmental policy analyst for the center and former director of the Department of Environmental Quality. “Rather, state parks were intended to be special places representing the best Michigan has to offer in natural and historic resources.”

He said the 14 he listed represented the least unique of the 97 state parks. And he said selling the parks would reduce state competition with private campgrounds.

Ron Olson, state parks chief for the DNR, said the Citizens for State Parks Committee is looking at whether all of the current state parks should be kept as part of its review on making the system more self-sufficient for the long term.

But he questioned whether neighboring residents or others in the state would agree

with Mr. Harding’s observations on the particular parks.

“I’m not in favor of the conclusion, but we owe it to the system to look at everything,” Mr. Olson said. “Let’s ask ourselves that question about the intrinsic value of these lands and can they stand up to the criteria of what makes a state park a state park?”

Mr. Olson said considerations also need to be made beyond the raw resource value of the land. “We know that there’s a state park within an hour drive of every resident and that’s important,” he said, adding that in some areas just having public open space is of value.

Selling the land also raised the concern that it would eventually be closed to public recreation, he said. “How do we know that a private business could make a profit on the land?” he said. If the land is not profitable as a public recreation area, it could be sold for private development, he said.

In the end, however, the committee’s call is to make recommendations that will keep the parks system afloat with no general fund contribution. “We have \$95 million of infrastructure things we need to address in the next five years,” he said. “Raising fees isn’t going to address that.”

Of note in measuring the original goals of the system versus the current park ownership: Interlochen State Park, one of the first two state parks, is one Mr. Harding recommended be sold, in this case to neighboring Interlochen Center for the Arts.