



State Parks Must Change or They Will Die

By Russ Harding

Summary

State officials should use the voter-approved State Parks Endowment Fund to upgrade and maintain Michigan's state parks system, rather than rely on highly risky federal stimulus money.

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However much we love our state parks, Michigan must make major structural changes to the way they are managed if we are to save them. From the forests and lakes of Porcupine State Park in Ontonagon to the American Lotus beds of Sterling State Park in Monroe, our state parks feature some of the finest natural assets in the nation. Unfortunately, we are spending not only the interest but also the principal on our state park resources. According to an Associated Press article appearing in the Detroit Free Press, state park officials identified 300 park improvement projects totaling \$200 million in hopes of obtaining federal stimulus funds. Many of these projects are needed just to address basic critical infrastructure needs such as sewer, water and roads.

The state policy of relying on additional funding to fix problems in state parks has been a failed strategy. Even dedicated funding sources for state parks approved by voters are not safe from clever state officials and legislators looking to fill budget gaps during lean economic times.

Voters in 1994 approved Proposal P creating the State Parks Endowment Fund. The fund was supposed to receive \$10 million or 50 percent (whichever is the lesser amount) of mineral revenues each year until it reaches \$400 million. Once it reaches \$400 million, the fund would receive 100 percent of mineral revenues until it reaches \$800 million. According to a Department of Natural Resources Web site last updated Sept. 30, 2007, the SPEF has a balance of \$133 million. Only \$14 million has been appropriated from the fund over the last 15 years, according to DNR officials, although \$2 million of that was used to fund activities unrelated to state parks.

It would be unwise to rely on federal stimulus funding to meet state park maintenance needs, especially when you consider that voters approved the State Parks Endowment Fund under the assumption that it would be used to maintain and improve our parks. State officials admit that even the recently passed pork-laden federal stimulus bill of nearly \$1 trillion will not fund more than a handful of state park projects.

Rather than betting the future of Michigan state parks on unreliable funding sources, the state should instead quickly implement the following changes:

- Privatize some state parks that do not pay their way or that do not contain significant natural resources or recreational value. The state simply does not have the resources to maintain 97 state parks.

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This photo shows the main entrance of the Abe Martin Lodge located in the Brown County State Park in Nashville, Ind. Michigan's state parks would benefit by pursuing private investment in facilities such as lodges to expand recreational opportunities and amenities at selected locations.

Source: Indiana Department of Natural Resources

- Contract for janitorial and law enforcement services within state parks. There exists a potential to save a considerable amount of operating funds by competitively bidding to the private sector routine janitorial and maintenance services at many state parks. As we've seen with local school districts, there is no shortage of private janitorial companies that are capable and willing to perform such tasks at competitive prices. Arrangements could be made with local law enforcement agencies or state troopers to perform most of the routine law enforcement duties in most state parks.
- Seek private investment in state parks through expanded private development projects. Unlike Michigan, many other states actively solicit private investment in their state parks through facilities such as lodges and restaurants. While these types of facilities may not be appropriate or needed in all state parks, there are a number that would financially benefit from private investment. Other states have successfully used private investment to generate revenue and assist in park maintenance while providing park visitors with expanded recreational opportunities. The state has the ability to control the type of private investment to ensure that traditional state park values and character are not sacrificed.

If state officials do not accept budget realities and continue to manage state parks in the same manner they have in past decades, our children will inherit a park system in disrepair. Decisive and innovative management practices can prevent this tragedy.

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