The State of State Parks: After Years of Budget Shortfalls, Some States Renewing Commitment to Funding Parks

By Lisa McKinney [1]
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As the weather warms and visitors flock to state parks, they may find fewer amenities, shorter hours and higher fees. After years of budget cuts, many state park directors have had to make tough calls about how to make up for the shortfalls and find creative solutions for raising revenue.

“State parks are among the very first places people look to cut,” during budget crunches, said Connecticut state Sen. Ted Kennedy Jr., at a March 9 news conference. With state budget cuts imminent, Kennedy is one of a group of legislators looking for alternative ways to fund state parks.

Those alternatives include an expanded bottle deposit program and a 5 cent surcharge on plastic shopping bags, as well as private sponsorships, reported the Hartford Courant. Parking and camping fees paid by visitors are put into the state general fund, so park funding isn’t directly correlated to how many visitors they attract.

Alaska’s Department of Natural Resources is turning to privatization to keep four state parks that will lose their state funding in July up and running. The department was accepting applications from non-profit and for-profit groups to operate the parks’ facilities until March 15, reported KTVA Alaska. If the department cannot make arrangements with a private group, the land will remain open to the public, but features such as bathrooms, roads and campsites would likely be shut down.

In Alabama, state Sen. Clay Scofield is planning to introduce a bill that would prevent park entrance fees and other revenue sources from being redirected to the general fund—allowing parks to keep what they make. The Alabama park system is predominantly self-funded and the cost of operations is supported by park revenues.

The Alabama Legislature has transferred $30 million from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which encompasses state parks, into the general fund since the 2012 fiscal year, according Alabama State Parks Director Greg Lein. The department did not know how much money would be transferred out each year, which left them unable to make long-term plans about maintenance and upgrades. Five parks were closed as a result of budget cuts, but three of them have since reopened through partnerships with local governments.

“It has canceled or delayed maintenance and improvement projects, creating a backlog of work and starting a degradation of our park product,” said Lein of the revenue transfers. “This has also created an undesirable business environment that inhibits financial partnering with local governments and private businesses.”
For Alabama parks, 2015 was a record year in terms of attendance, but the parks weren't able to reap the benefits of their good performance. Lein said some legislators view Scofield’s legislation as an earmarking action, but he remains optimistic that it will pass.

The Texas Legislature looked to sales taxes to support their parks, passing legislation for the 2016-17 biennium that committed 94 percent of sales tax revenue from sporting goods to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, reported The Tribune newspapers. The new funding source will help finance 80 state park repair and upgrade projects, including the redevelopment of Galveston Island State Park beachside, which was destroyed by Hurricane Ike in 2008.

In New York, a $450,000 grant funded through the Environmental Protection Fund will be matched by nearly $242,000 in private and local funding to help address some repairs and upgrades needed by state parks and expand public access. On March 9, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced the grants would be given to 20 organizations to support and promote state parks and historic sites.

"These grants will help preserve New York's natural green spaces while also boosting tourism and strengthening local economies," Cuomo said in a news release. "Our parks, trails and historic sites are some of the best outdoor destinations in the nation, and this funding will help ensure they remain in peak condition for years to come."

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