

MISSOURI STATE PARKS: A CASE FOR FUNDING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION



Missouri's nationally renowned system of state parks and historic sites is facing a major crisis – a backlog of some \$400 million in unfunded capital improvement and infrastructure needs.

Our park system, which attracts 18 million visitors a year, has been recognized as one of the best in the nation owing to the quality of the natural and cultural resources it protects, excellence of management, and strong citizen support, but that reputation for quality is now in jeopardy. The problem has been developing for two decades, but the recent economic crisis has both exacerbated it and called attention to the urgent need to address it.

HOW DID THE PROBLEM DEVELOP?

The current 1/10th of 1% Parks and Soils Sales Tax, of which parks get 50 percent, was initially approved in a statewide vote of the people in 1984 and renewed in 1988, 1996, and 2006, most recently by an overwhelming 71 percent of voters. It will be up for renewal again in 2016. The sales tax has helped greatly to provide a consistent source of funding from year to year, but it was never intended to do the job alone. The system historically also received state general revenue, primarily for staff salaries and other operating expenses, park earnings from user fees and concessions, and special funds for infrastructure and major projects.

Major funding for infrastructure and other capital improvements came to the state park system from federal Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds during the depression of the 1930s, the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund in the 1960s and '70s, and the Third State Building Fund bond issue of the 1980s, of which state parks were allocated about \$60 million (10 percent of the total).

But, when state general revenue for staff salaries was stripped from state parks during a budgetary crisis in 1990, both salaries and benefits (which had not previously been charged to the park budget) had to be paid from the sales tax. Over the years there have been many other unanticipated expenditures and diversions from the sales tax—for oversight by other state agencies, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and legal settlements, coupled with more than 100 sales tax exemptions by legislative or court action.

With no state general revenue and no further special capital improvements funding after the bond issue of the 1980s, the park system is now dependent for all purposes on the sales tax for more than 75 percent of its budget (the remainder comes mostly from earned fees for services). The result has been a growing backlog of vitally needed infrastructure rehabilitation and other capital improvements, now amounting to some \$400 million.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF THE RECENT ECONOMIC CRISIS?

The steep downturn in sales tax revenues as a result of the recent economic crisis resulted in a decline of over \$4 million, while expenses continued to grow. This necessitated extreme belt tightening – more than 120 staff positions (20 percent of the total) eliminated in 2009, days and hours of operation reduced, more expenses deferred – while striving to maintain an adequate level of public service. Funds for infrastructure repair and rehabilitation are obviously even more constrained, leading the backlog to grow more rapidly and the eventual cost of repairs to increase.

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS?

The \$400 million capital improvements backlog consists of vitally needed infrastructure repair and rehabilitation. The park system has 56 park-owned water systems and 96 sewer systems, each of which is the equivalent of that for a small city, but unlike most municipal systems our parks have not been deemed eligible for major federal matching funds. There are 40 dams, 300 miles of roads, 95 bridges, and over 1,000 miles of trails to maintain, not including the Katy Trail, which adds another 236 miles of trail, 472 bridges, nearly 900 culverts, and 58 structures.

Recreational facilities include more than 3,700 campsites, as well as marinas, boat launches, swimming pools and shelters. Educational exhibits throughout the system, both outdoor and indoor, are in need of repair or updating. The system also must maintain 2,043 structures, 700 of which are historic, including fourteen CCC-era group camps with sleeping facilities for more than 1,250 and 316 other cabin or motel lodging units. It is worth noting that the state park system contains 56 percent of the 3,657 buildings under the jurisdiction of the state Office of Administration.

Not included in the \$400 million backlog is any funding for acquisition of new parks or acreage. The pressing need at this time is to take care of the existing park system.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The measure most obviously needed now is inclusion of the state park system in a state bond issue for capital improvements. (It will also be critical to renew the park sales tax when it next comes up for a vote in 2016.)

A joint resolution for a Fifth State Building Fund in the 2009 session of the General Assembly passed the House and was approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee but filibustered to death on the floor. Similar measures for a \$950 million bond issue with at least \$40 million for state parks have been introduced in the 2013 session of the Missouri Senate (SJR3) and House (HJR14).

We advocate that at least ten percent of any state capital improvements bond issue be designated for state parks, with the amount for parks specified in the bill.

WHY NOW?

A Fifth State Building Fund bond issue could utilize the revenue stream from the retirement of the Third State Building Fund bonds, recently paid off, thus avoiding a new tax. Once passed by both houses, the referendum would have to be approved by a vote of the citizenry; the widespread public support for state parks (as reflected in the 71% "yes" vote in the 2006 sales tax renewal) is a major selling point for including state parks.

Such a bond issue is not a complete solution but it is an essential step, and this is the best time to take that step—at a time of low interest rates, low construction costs, and a tremendous need for the private sector jobs that these capital improvement projects would create for local construction firms statewide. The state has a responsibility to maintain its infrastructure from which it cannot walk away. The longer we wait, the more the projects will cost.

State parks are an excellent public investment. Missouri's state park system costs each Missourian only \$6 a year through the parks sales tax, while a 2012 study revealed that the system contributes more than \$1 billion in sales, \$300 million in income, 14,535 jobs, and \$123 million in taxes to Missouri's economy.

Please talk and write to your legislators, your local media, and your friends and organizations about the problem and the solution.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: <http://parks.missouri.org>. The State Park Funding Coalition is led by Susan Flader of the Missouri Parks Association (fladers@missouri.edu) and Dave Murphy of the Conservation Federation of Missouri (dmurphy@confedmo.org).

