



## Finally, a good plan for funding state parks

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By Howard Meyerson

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IONIA -- At last, a breath of fresh air. That's what I thought of a sweeping proposal put forth and adopted by the Citizens Committee for State Parks when they met here Wednesday.

Someone is finally stepping forward with courage and conviction. The group has a smart plan for how to avert the \$38 million state park funding crisis that looms in 2009 when as many as 37 state parks could be closed.

And better yet, their proposal doesn't steal money from one state program to pay for another. It wisely provides a comprehensive approach to funding state parks, local parks and state forest recreation programs.

You may recall that the committee was convened by the Michigan legislature in 2004 to advise on state park issues and long-term funding.

It is recommending that Michigan do away with the \$24 annual and \$6 daily entry fees at 98 state parks, as well as the same fees at 1,007 state-run boating access sites.

### Cost tied to license plates fees

That is a huge leap forward for Michigan, which derives \$12 million in revenue from those fees. The group instead calls for the creation of a State Park, Boating Access Site and Forest Recreation Passport.

Cost: nine dollars. It would be added to the cost of every motor vehicle license plate. Motorcyclists would pay only \$4.50 extra per plate. Those who never use state parks or choose not to support them could opt out and get a refund.

A family with two cars would pay \$18 total, still less than the current annual fee for one. Non-residents would continue to pay the old fee.

"We've researched this for more than year," said committee member Dr. Chuck Nelson, a professor in natural resources at Michigan State University. "We felt it was time to move ahead with a specific alternative."

Nelson said the plan would "recapitalize" the state park system. It would put an end to the practice of drawing operations money from the state park trust fund.

It would provide funding for state forest campgrounds and pathways and grants to local governments that need help developing parks, greenways and bike trails. It would also make state parks

more affordable to those with less income.

The plan is modeled after one used in Montana. Theirs is less ambitious with a \$4 annual fee. But the funding needs are also lower.

"They got 80 percent participation the first year and 85 percent this year, the third year," said Nelson. "Montana does this at \$4, but the first thing they said (when consulted) is they wish they had gone a little higher."

Montana wasn't the only state studied, according to Ron Olson Michigan's state park chief. Missouri uses a percentage of sales tax. Texas uses a tax on sporting goods. Florida uses a real estate transfer tax, like Maryland.

"And many states have a percentage of the general fund," he said.

But not Michigan.

State parks are funded by campers fees, entry fees, concession fees, shelter rentals and from the Natural Resources Trust Fund which collects oil and gas exploration royalties. Meanwhile, they provide access to some of Michigan's finest natural resources.

They are lands that the state would never be able to acquire today, nor re-acquire if they were gone. State parks and forests comprise a large part of Michigan's natural land legacy. Those are lands set aside both for us and generations to come.

"We think this is a good model and a more equitable way to address the funding needs," Olson said. "Having campers and day-users pay all of it is not the most equitable approach, given the diversity of uses."

That sentiment was strongly echoed by Murdock Jemerson, the committee chairman. Jemerson is Lansing's Department of Parks and Recreation director. He saw the very real opportunities that might accrue for local park programs.

"The possibility of closing 37 state parks is unacceptable, but I am also here to talk about the local end of it," Jemerson said.

The proposal calls for 10 percent of the collected revenues to be available for local communities. Various scenarios show between \$41 million and \$48 million in revenue, meaning more than \$4 million a year for local program grants.

The committee's proposal has been sent to DNR director, Becky Humphries and the Natural Resources Commission which will meet next week and discuss it. To fly will require legislation, support in both Houses and by the Governor.

Nelson advised the committee that it would likely be poked and prodded, possibly reshaped. Other ideas are reported to be surfacing in Lansing. The committee had done its job.

In an after-meeting chat, Jemerson put a point on it.

"The user-pay model funded by campers has reached it peak," he said. "We've done our homework and have come up with some ideas. This is a state park system and the whole state should support it."

After months of legislative double-speak about natural resource funding, all I could think is: How very refreshing.

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