

Our DNR Funding Crisis

And a proposed solution to keep our parks and trails open

Continued cuts to the DNR budget have pushed us to a point where it's starting to hurt real badly.

	Funding Problem	Result
June 2007	\$75,000 is cut from the 2007 state forest recreation funding	Closed 20 state forest campgrounds
October 2007	\$423,200 is cut from the 2008 state forest recreation funding	Closing 50 state forest campgrounds Ceasing maintenance on all forest trails Stopping XC ski grooming on 16 trails
October 2008	\$5.3 million dollar deficit in the state park funding primary due to zero taxpayer support	Approximately 37 state parks will be closed possibly starting as early as April 2008

There are other DNR funding issues too. The Legislature has passed a bill that would spend the Michigan Civilian Conservation Corps \$20 million savings account to pay down the state's deficit. Currently the interest on that account provides \$1 million a year to the DNR to pay for park stewardship and maintenance work.

Another major issue involves the hunting and fishing license fees. So far, the Legislature has refused to raise these license fees to cover increased DNR costs. Without the increase, the DNR Wildlife division has begun laying off conservation officers and cutting major wildlife management programs.

And it should be noted that since Fiscal Year 2005, the DNR has reduced its programs by more than \$20 million.

Eliminating Forest Trail Maintenance

There are sixty-six state forest pathways in Michigan that provide a combined 880 miles of non-motorized trail. All but two of those are open to mountain biking. This includes some incredible trails such as the High Country Pathway, VASA, and many portions of the North Country Trail.

Each year the DNR hires seasonal employees that are responsible for much of the daily work on these forest trails as well as 143 state forest campgrounds, including the cleaning of toilet buildings and trash pick up.

There used to be 50 seasonal staff employees doing this work across the state. Ten were cut in 2007. A substantial number will be cut for 2008 as a result of a \$423,200 cut to the DNR recreation funding budget.

Also, according to the Director office, this budget cut forces the DNR to close 30 campgrounds in addition to the 20 that were closed during the summer.

As for XC skiing, 16 trails that the DNR groomed in the past will not be groomed this winter. Their parking areas won't be plowed either. That leaves just 8 trails which hopefully can be groomed by volunteer groups and grant funding.

Closing 37 State Parks

The number of park closures is really an estimate based on average park revenues and the anticipated deficit in state park funding. The final closure number may be higher or it may be lower.

There is no list of parks that would be targeted for closure, though parks that don't make money would be the most likely candidates. Unfortunately, most of those money-losing parks are in the Southeast Michigan area, especially those without strong camping revenues (e.g. Pontiac Lake, Bald Mountain.) State parks along Michigan's west coast traditionally bring in significant campground revenue and effectively subsidize those parks around Metro Detroit.

While the budget deficit hits in Fiscal Year 2009 (October 1st, 2008), some park closures may start as early as April. The problem is the DNR may be unable to hire seasonal employees in April while full-time DNR employees are laid off. (Currently, DNR Wildlife employees are being laid off due to the state legislature not supporting hunting and license fee increases.)

How did we get to this deficit? Nearly all state parks across the U.S. receive some taxpayer funding. Michigan state parks have not had taxpayer support since 2004. At that time, money that was supposed to cover major capital repairs (e.g. roads, buildings) had to be diverted to cover just the parks' day-to-day operations. Our park financial situation is like a fall-line trail down a hill. It might hold up for a little while, but eventually it's going to erode away.

Looking for Solutions

Given the current state budget situation in Lansing, asking for funding from our legislature is a non-starter.

Instead, our Citizen's Committee looked at what other states have done. We wanted a solution that spread the cost among residents as well as non-residents. We wanted a solution that would put this DNR funding issue to bed for this generation as well as those in the future. We didn't want to revisit this again nor burden future generations.

"The Legislature also must come up with some way to provide relief for the state's superb park system. It's one of the biggest and best in the country, but it is falling apart because it's broke and can no longer afford to keep up even with daily maintenance."

Eric Sharp, Detroit Free Press Outdoors Writer

We considered a ballot issue, but the costs associated with them (millions of dollars) and their success rates (very low) made it not worth taking a chance.

We wanted a solution that didn't have many enemies. These days every group in Lansing is guarding their state monies. It's unrealistic to think we could sneak money away from schools or corrections.

But most importantly, we wanted a solution that had a chance for success in this economic and political environment. This is no time to put your bet on a losing horse.

Choosing a Solution

Among all the state solutions we looked at, Montana's rose to the top. It added a fee to all personal vehicle registrations and eliminated state park entrance fees, which saved park money. They also allowed vehicle owners to ask for a refund if they did not intend to use the parks.

Out-of-state park users would still need to purchase an annual or one-day pass. And, this proposal makes enforcing these purchases much easier since the DNR park personnel only need to check vehicles with out of state plates.

We modified the solution to also provide adequate funding for our state forest recreation trails and campgrounds. It would be difficult to applaud keeping state parks open while forest trails and campgrounds were closed.

Similarly, the solution provides much-needed grant match money to support local park development.

And while there may be suggested tweaks and improvements, it's hoped that all park and trail groups will simply unite behind this solution since that is a necessity for its success and time is running out.

Solving the Crisis

Of course we haven't solved anything yet. Our proposal is simply a proposal. It has been forwarded to the Natural Resource Commission, the Governor's office, and our legislature.

WE NEED YOU TO CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATORS AND ASK THEM TO SUPPORT THIS PROPOSAL!

There has never been a more important time for park and trail users to contact their State Senators and State Representatives. We need to get this proposal written into legislation, passed by the House and Senate, then signed by the Governor – and preferably get this done by April.

Visit www.m-bike.org/dnr for more information on how you and your friends can make a difference.

Todd Scott is a former executive director for the MMBA. He is a member of the Citizen's Committee for Michigan State Parks and the Recreational Trails Program Advisory Committee.

How to Contact your State Legislators

One easy solution is to visit www.m-bike.org/dnr.

This web page has information about the resolution and links for finding your Senator and State Representative. It also includes a sample email, sample letter and plenty of supporting information.

You don't need to write anything elaborate. Any contact in support of this proposal is a help as long as it is constructive.

If you have the time, feel free to share with your legislators how important these parks and trails are for you or your family. How would these closures affect you?

Don't wait. Call or email now!