

Rep. Allen: Statement on the re-opening of state parks

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Last week Rep. Allen sent the following letter to DNR Secretary Preston Cole. “Today, I’m grateful that the Administration recognizes the value of our State Parks for the mental and physical health of Wisconsin residents and is reopening many of the parks for us to enjoy. I question the logic of keeping restrooms closed and the need to close on Wednesdays when many of the commonly used assets of the park will remain unavailable. Nonetheless, I’m glad that the Administration is taking common sense steps forward.”:

Secretary Cole:

As you wrote on March 19, “We recognize that spending time outdoors benefits both physical and mental health. Getting outdoors can also help relieve stress, especially during this public health emergency. A quiet walk does wonders to reduce our anxiety...” You went on to say “The DNR is committed to providing a safe environment for our visitors to enjoy, while protecting the health of our staff.”

I wholeheartedly believe in your commitment and ability to fulfill that promise.

Parks were closed a couple of weeks ago in many parts of the state due to litter, failure of guests to adhere to social distancing, and vandalism. It is incumbent upon us to make modifications to standards of practice in our parks in order to protect the public’s physical health while acknowledging our treasured outdoor spaces provide tremendous mental health benefits which are needed during this stressful time.

There are reasonable ways to accomplish those goals and reopen state parks. I propose the following:

Reinstate fees for state parks, making visitors stakeholders and offsetting the costs of increased maintenance.

1. Post signs at park entrances suggesting that visitors may be asked to leave the park if “leave no trace” or social distancing protocols are not followed.
2. In areas without trash receptacles, post signage reminding visitors to comply with “leave no trace” protocols.
3. Place signage at congregating areas such as pavilions and picnic areas either closing those areas or reminding visitors of social distancing protocols.
4. Move staff currently idled or seeing decreased workload to parks seeing a surge in visitors.
5. Vigorously cite people who litter or commit acts of vandalism. Reach out to “Friends of the Parks” groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and other community organizations and recruit more volunteers for maintenance.

The Administration has flexibility to reassign staff across departments if you feel that the DNR does not have sufficient staff to address our resident’s needs.

Wisconsin residents have been cooped up in their homes since late last fall, and in a more concentrated fashion for about a month. Reopening our state parks in a safe and responsible manner would be a great service to the people of our state.

I optimistically await your response.