

Howard Marklein: Continued progress in our state parks

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My family and I just returned from our annual visit to Peninsula State Park in Door County. It was a terrific trip! The park was beautiful, the meals were delicious, and even a little rain couldn't keep us from having a wonderful time.

We have been camping in Door County for nearly 30 years. Our annual trip gives me a perfect opportunity to observe the continued progress we are making in our state parks, reflect on what we have accomplished and look forward to the future.

The 17th Senate District contains 10 state parks. The most state parks in a single Senate District in Wisconsin! I have always had a passion for our beautiful state parks and have led the effort in the legislature to reform the state parks system to make it self-sufficient and improve the user experience.

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As I do most years, I stopped in for a visit with Peninsula State Park Superintendent Eric Hyde to see how things were going at the park. We discussed park attendance, staffing, opportunities for growth, park maintenance, future improvements and camping.

The majority of our discussion centered on camping. Camping in a Wisconsin state park is a great bargain! The price is reasonable, the campsites are well kept and the locations spectacular. However, even on the nicest weekends of the year, a "full" campground doesn't necessarily mean that every campsite is actually occupied.

If you look at the Wisconsin State Park campsite reservation system, every campsite

is “full” at many of the most popular state parks, including Peninsula State Park, during the summer months. However, the boots on the ground tell a different story. Many campsites that are “reserved” sit empty and unused – on the busiest summer weekends of the year. I experienced this firsthand last week and it is the number one complaint that Superintendent Hyde hears from campers. There are many people who would gladly use these campsites if given the opportunity!

This fall, I will be working with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and exploring legislation to ensure our campgrounds are truly full and Wisconsin residents and visitors can experience all that our state parks have to offer. I am researching a number of different options including an early registration window for Wisconsin residents and ways to reduce no-shows and date changes. Stay tuned!

I am also proud to report that we made significant investments in state parks in the state budget.

In the 2015 budget, I led the effort to ensure that our state parks were self-sufficient by implementing private-sector business practices. Previously, state taxpayers were subsidizing my annual Peninsula State Park camping trip. Instead, we gave the DNR the flexibility to implement dynamic pricing to ensure our parks were completely user fee funded.

Thanks to the success of our reforms, there was a large balance sitting in the State Parks Account. The goal of an entirely user fee driven system is to improve the parks, not generate money for it to sit in the bank.

In the state budget, we invested more than \$33 million in our state parks and forests in the budget. We focused our investments on fixing, maintaining and improving our state parks. The funds will be used for everything from new fire rings and picnic tables to repaving roads to new toilet and shower buildings. We increased the number of electric campsites and invested in parks technology upgrades. We also gave additional flexibility to the DNR to increase the nonresident camping fee by an additional \$10 per night.

Our reforms are working!

It is exciting to see the improvements in our state parks. We are making good progress, but there is more work to be done. I look forward to continuing to improve

Wisconsin's beautiful state parks.

-Marklein, R-Spring Green, is co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee and represents the 17th Senate District.