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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

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More Progress in Our State Parks

My family 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 the weather was fine, which is a good thing since Peggy and I are tent campers!

This was the 28th year we have visited Peninsula State Park. Our annual trip gives me a perfect opportunity to observe the progress we are making at our state parks. It also provides me with a unique perspective and passion for improving them.

I am in consistent communications with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to request reservation and revenue data for our state parks. It has been fascinating to watch camping and reservation trends over the last several years since the legislature provided the department with more flexibility and resources. The demographics and preferences of campers are changing and our park system is adjusting to meet increased demand for maximizing revenue.

Last summer, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major positive impact on park attendance, camping reservations and park visitors. Wisconsin residents and tourists from other states were desperate for outdoor activities. This trend led to a significant increase in campground occupancy across the state. The occupancy rate increased by 11% in 2020 (71.6%) compared to 2019 (60.6%). While down slightly in 2021 from 2020, 2021 occupancy rates are still well above 2019, and earlier, levels.

State park campgrounds added a significant number of electric campsites between 2018 and 2019 and while the occupancy rate decreased initially, the raw number of occupied sites increased in 2019. By 2020, the occupancy rate for electric sites was the highest in at least 5 years. Our parks charge higher rates for electric campsites, thus increasing revenues which are returned to the parks for improvements.

While the rate is higher for electric sites versus non-electric sites, camping at our state parks is still very affordable. For example, the busiest park in Wisconsin is Devil's Lake State Park in Baraboo. On a weekend, electric sites are \$37 per night for Wisconsin residents and \$42 for non-residents. Non-electric sites are \$22 for residents on the weekend while non-residents pay \$27 per night.

The rate variations have not affected reservations. The most popular parks are at least 85% full for the entire summer season (this includes weekdays). Even smaller parks have strong occupancy rates. Yellowstone Lake State Park in Lafayette County has 52.16% occupancy this year. In 2019, they were at 45.66% and last year jumped to 55.20%.

This is why we instituted flexible pricing that is employed by private-sector hospitality businesses throughout the world. In the 2015-16 State Budget, I led an effort to reform the way revenue is generated

for the Wisconsin State Park System using private-sector strategies like variable pricing that have driven success at our state parks.

In the 2017-18 state budget, I authored another motion to provide additional tools and flexibility for the DNR to continue moving toward self-sustainability for the state park system. These tools included allowing the DNR the option to invest \$1 million each year of the biennium from the State Parks Account for maintenance and improvement projects such as repairing facilities, replacing signage, replacing drinking fountains and upgrading non-electric sites to electricity; raising the state-wide cap for electrical sites from 30% to 35% of campsites statewide; increasing the park sticker fee by \$5 for residents and non-residents; creating a \$5 surcharge for electrical sites at popular parks; and increasing the range up to \$10 for nightly camping fees at the Secretary's discretion.

In April 2018, the Joint Finance Committee (JFC), which I now co-chair, allocated an additional \$2.2 million on top of the \$2 million allocated in the state budget to the state parks. These funds, which come from the State Parks Fund, were used for additional improvements and remodeling immediately. This investment was leveraged with funding from local park Friends groups, stewardship funding and other project-based funding.

In the same year, the State Building Commission authorized the renovation and construction of 200 additional electrical campsites system-wide. Park visitors tell us that they want more electric sites and the reforms we have made, as well as the flexibility for investments, are enabling the State Parks to respond quickly to this demand, which will generate additional revenues in turn.

The 2019-20 State Budget provided an additional \$1 million to the operational budget for the park system for staff salaries, materials and other needs. We also provided funding to finish the new site electrification project.

Finally, in the most recent budget I led an effort to reinvest another \$1.5 million into the State Park Development Fund. This funding comes directly from camping fees and park stickers. We are reinvesting these funds into the parks so that they can do smaller projects such as improving gravel pads and trails, purchasing picnic tables and updating fire rings. We are taking the fruits of our restructured business model and reinvesting in our parks. I am hopeful that we will continue to expand private sector practices to increase revenues at our state parks.

I met with Eric Hyde, the Superintendent of Peninsula, Newport & Rock Island State Parks during my camping trip. Eric showed me several recently completed projects such as the new waste disposal site, a \$1 million vault replacement and waste treatment station project. He is planning on new bathroom facilities and road updates next year.

It is exciting to see the improvements at state parks system wide. It is also good to see that occupancy and visitor trends are increasing every year. Visiting a state park or hiking on a state trail is good for us. There is nothing quite like connecting with nature and we are very fortunate to have dozens of incredible parks and trails to visit in Wisconsin.

For more information and to connect with me, visit my website <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/17/marklein> and subscribe to my weekly E-Update by sending an email to Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov. Do not hesitate to call 800-978-8008 if you have input, ideas or need assistance with any state-related matters.

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