



HOWARD MARKLEIN

STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

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Capitalizing on Campsites

As the weather improves, we turn our attention from blowing snow to planning summer adventures. For many of us, our adventures take us to one of the many state parks in Wisconsin where we enjoy camping at some of the best campgrounds in the country. Wisconsin's state park system, which is managed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), is a tremendous product in very high demand.

Each summer, many of our most popular state parks are filled to capacity. Devil's Lake State Park in Baraboo, Peninsula State Park in Door County, Blue Mound State Park in Blue Mounds, Governor Dodge State Park in Dodgeville and Kohler-Andrae State Park in Sheboygan are among the most popular parks and it is difficult to get a reservation for a campsite less than a year in advance for weekends and the warmest months. Devil's Lake State Park had over a 99% occupancy for the summer months. It was at capacity, with a "waiting list."

Every year my family camps in beautiful Peninsula State Park for a family vacation and every year competition for the best spots in the park is intense. As soon as we can reserve for the next summer, my family lines up at computers and frantically tries to reserve spots at 9 a.m. exactly 11 months ahead of our plans for the next year.

Until recently, the DNR charged one flat rate for campsites, regardless of the location and regardless of the popularity of the park. It did not make sense that we charge the same camping rate for our high demand parks as we do for less popular parks. During the last budget cycle, I authored a resolution to change the pricing of State Park reservations to allow the DNR to identify which parks and campsites are the most popular and to adjust prices according to demand. The changes I authored took affect for reservations for campsites beginning this July. For example, we increased daily camping rates at Devil's Lake and Peninsula from \$15 to \$20 for residents, and from \$17 to \$25 for non-residents. We also increased the rate for electric campsites, which are in high demand.

It should be noted that under the old pricing structure, the parks were not generating enough revenue to support themselves, and taxpayers were subsidizing the State Parks. So my family, and campers from Illinois, were being subsidized by about 25% for camping at our State Parks. I don't think that it was good pricing policy to give campers at our highest demand parks a taxpayer subsidy.

So what has been the impact on reservations of the price increases? Our campsites at Devil's Lake and Peninsula State park are full! All of the electric sites are reserved.

Based on current reservations, revenue from campsites for the most popular months of July and August are currently projected to be \$2.3 million. This is \$1 million more than the previous year. Peninsula State Park alone has seen an increase of more than \$300,000 in reservation payments for this summer.

Wisconsin State Park Reservation Revenue (July 1 – August 31 Stays)

Year	Total Payments Received (\$ Millions)
2015	\$1,345,634
2016	\$2,375,135

When the legislature changed the pricing options for the DNR, there were concerns that adjusting the pricing would impact reservations negatively. So far, this concern has not manifested. Families continue to make reservations and are planning summer adventures in our state parks. Wisconsin is simply capitalizing on one of our assets.

The increase in revenue will make the state park system self-sustaining. Past budgets have required the legislature to allocate funding for maintenance, improvements and staffing at our parks because while some of them are extremely profitable, others are not. By increasing revenue on the popular parks, we are able to make strides toward funding the operations at all of the parks with park revenue.

In addition to price increases at popular parks, we also enabled the DNR to lower prices at less popular parks to encourage campers to try other locations and generate traffic for all of our parks. It will be interesting to examine the results of these practices next fall after the camping season closes for the year.

Introducing the private-sector concept of supply and demand into the park system is allowing our state parks to take advantage of their popularity not only with residents, but with out-of-state tourists. With these results continuing, our park system is poised to be more independent of taxpayers and better able to maintain its strong presence in our state.

To make a reservation at one of our state parks, please visit <http://wisconsinstateparks.reserveamerica.com/>

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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