

PARKS AND RECREATION

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Over the past few years, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has seen its sources of federal and state funding reduced, yet at each of these levels, parks facilities managed to ensure adequate funding and consistent quality for the recreational life of the state. Moreover, the royalties that have been collected by DCNR from Marcellus shale gas operations have introduced a new and growing source of income for the agency. Despite the economic downturn and a significant reduction in state funding, DCNR succeeded in expanding its source of income, as well as managing its programs and facilities expertly, to further increase the appeal and reputation of state parks, forests, and recreational areas and continue Pennsylvania's tradition as a leader in this category. Municipal Parks and other public recreational facilities throughout the state experienced similar conditions as did the State Parks. These facilities were able to expand income sources and maintain their services as well.

BACKGROUND

Approximately 11 percent of Pennsylvania's land or 3.24 million acres is dedicated to parks and recreation. Pennsylvania is home to 15 national recreational areas, six national heritage areas, 26 natural landmarks, 120 state parks, 20 state forests, 23 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) recreational reservoirs, and 180 county parks, as well as numerous city and municipal parks. More than 47 million people visit the state and federal parks each year.

Moreover, the total length of trails managed by state and federal agencies, as well as local municipalities and non-profit organizations, is approximately 10,800 miles which is 10-times more than Yellowstone National Park. The Allegheny National Forest alone comprises 513,000 acres of forested land. The state park and forest lands managed by DCNR together cover 2.5 million acres of preserved space, and since 2009, the agency has succeeded in conserving about 40,000 acres of additional land. The combined area of all the county parks in the state encompasses 67,000 acres. In addition, the Pennsylvania Game Commission preserves over 1.4 million acres of state game lands for the purposes of hunting and fishing in addition to that permitted in the parks and forests managed by DCNR.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service oversees the Allegheny National Forest, the USACE oversees the recreational reservoirs and dams, and DCNR is the steward of the state parks and forests. Each of these agencies maintains its own policies, budgets, and staff. Among the 67 counties in Pennsylvania, approximately 31 have recreational departments supported through local taxes, state funding, and

philanthropy. Through various community partnership programs, DCNR assists counties in the planning, maintenance, and funding of county and local parks.

Pennsylvania has two coastal zone areas: 63 miles of coastline along Lake Erie and 57 miles of coastline along the Delaware Estuary. These coastal zones include residential, commercial, industrial, and beach/recreational areas. These coastal areas are managed as part of the state's Coastal Zone Management Plan under the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972.

In 2011, the state's five-year Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan was honored as the best in the nation by the U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service (NPS) and the National Association for Recreation Resource Planners. In 2009, Pennsylvania's State Parks were awarded the National Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Parks and Recreation Management jointly by the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration and the National Recreation and Park Association, recognizing the state's parks as among the nation's best.

CONDITION AND CAPACITY

The U.S. National Park Service (NPS), USACE, DCNR, and the local municipalities are responsible for the operation and maintenance of infrastructure in recreational areas. These agencies also provide personnel and resources to manage, maintain, and protect the natural resources, with duties that include: preventing or controlling forest fires; managing mineral extraction; maintaining camp sites; providing outreach and educational programs; and managing the use of trees for timber as well as maintaining a tree nursery for new growth.

Capital Improvements

The infrastructure present in state parks and forests managed by DCNR include 3,720 miles of roads, 842 bridges, 121 dams, 68 wastewater treatment facilities, 172 public water supplies, 4,700 buildings, 4 ski areas, and 180 boat launches. For 2014, the state announced \$38 million in 198 grants to local governments and nonprofit organizations throughout the state for recreation and conservation projects, which combined various sources of federal and state funding into one package. The current need associated with these projects is nearly three times the made available in 2014 at \$100 million. Notable endowments from 2013 were providing more than \$1.5 million to the City of Philadelphia, in coordination with other state agencies and nonprofit organizations, for the construction of two urban parks, the Hawthorne Park and the Sister Cities Park completed within that timeframe.

Energy efficiency has been a major focus on DCNR properties; therefore the agency has been promoting the use of green technology in construction and land use. A long term benefit of energy efficiency is reduced operation and maintenance costs as well as reduction of impacts to natural resources both within and outside of the park properties. This includes alternative energy sources, such as solar and wind, being harnessed by its facilities. Currently, there are a total of 11 buildings located on various state parks and forests which have been certified by the U.S. Green Building Council as demonstrating Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED). Notable examples of such projects are:

- the Penn Nursery facility in Centre County (2011),



- the new Resource Management Center in Weiser State Forest (2012),



- the new visitor center at the Jacobsburg Environmental Education Center (2013),



- and the new visitor center at Ohiopyle State Park (anticipated to open in 2014).



Operations and Maintenance

State forests have more than 2,500 miles of trails used for hiking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, horseback riding, snowmobile riding, and ATV riding. Additional activities permitted in the state parks include camping, hunting, fishing, swimming, and boating. Picnic areas available at each state park are typically equipped with tables, fireplaces, potable water, and parking. Rental and user fees help finance the operation and maintenance of these facilities; however, other wide-scale maintenance issues such as fire, pest and invasive species control, and infrastructure upkeep require greater funding than the fees collected.

Protecting the environmental health of the state parks and forests is an important consideration in operation and maintenance activities. DCNR's Bureau of Forestry maintains a cadre of firefighters consisting of both its own staff as well as volunteers from municipal fire companies to help respond to forest fires and their effects on surrounding communities. Moreover, the agency trains approximately 4,500 local firefighters across Pennsylvania every year, in addition to deploying its manpower to other states that require assistance with extreme forest fire events, ranging as far as Alaska and Idaho, using funding from the U.S. Forest Service. The Bureau of Forestry also possesses a knowledgeable forest pest management staff that survey over 16 million acres of land throughout the state to detect and report pest damage and,

eventually, take measures to suppress them. Finally, DCNR's Bureau of Topographic and Geologic Survey has been monitoring certain revenue-producing critical natural resources found in state parks and forests such as oil, gas, coal, shale, aggregate, cement raw materials, and groundwater.

Income Sources

Pennsylvania's state forests contain some of the world's most valuable timber. The sale of timber products from state forests returns money to the Commonwealth and provides a stable resource base for the forest products industry. The timber cut from Pennsylvania's state forests can be marketed with a "green label", which means that the wood has been cut from a forest that is managed in an environmentally sensitive manner. In 2011, DCNR's Bureau of Forestry contracted harvesting over 12,000 acres of timber on state forest land, generating \$29 million in revenue.

User fees are assessed for snowmobile, ATV, and cross-country skiing uses. These fees typically generate about \$3.5 million per year of revenue to maintain the trails and other recreational services.

Land is leased in state forests for gas and oil well development, particularly that of Marcellus shale, with an 18 percent royalty generating revenue. The money generated from the oil and gas lease sales, rents, and royalties goes to the state's Oil and Gas Lease Fund. These funds have been used for projects such as land and mineral rights acquisition, infrastructure and trail improvements, habitat protection and restoration, and recreation equipment. Although this development started in 2008, by the end of 2013, there were 215 Marcellus shale gas wells operating on state forest lands, having generated approximately \$80 million in revenue.

Finally, the growth of DCNR's own rental program on state parks and public-private partnerships in the form of concession contracts to enable local business to provide amenities to state park visitors have created another source of income for the agency. DCNR's combined revenue from cabin and campsite rentals as well as gift shop sales has almost doubled from \$11 million in 2005 to \$20 million in 2011. There are currently 145 concession contracts throughout all state parks, providing amenities ranging from food and refreshment sales to equipment rentals to even the operation of entire recreational facilities. For the past few years, the top five sources of income have usually come from parking, watercraft and marina rentals, golf courses, whitewater rafting, and swimming pools.

MUNICIPAL PARK HIGHLIGHTS

Philadelphia

Philadelphia, the largest city in the state with approximately 1.5 million residents, has a park and recreation system comprising 10,300 acres, being approximately 10 percent of its entire area, and hosting 10 million visitors annually. Most of that space consists of Fairmount Park, encompassing 9,200 acres, and is the nation's largest landscaped urban park. Due to this unique park, the recreational area per 1,000 residents is almost 7 acres, making it is more than twice that of New York City which has a little more than 3 acres.

Over a period of four years from 2010 to 2014, the annual Philadelphia operating budget for parks and recreation has expanded almost 30 percent from \$46.7 million to \$60.4 million. This increase has been targeted particularly to deal with stormwater management, invasive plant control, deer control, and streambank erosion, as well as improved routine grounds maintenance, horticulture, facility maintenance, ecological management, urban forestry management, and public safety.

Pittsburgh

The City of Pittsburgh has numerous parks that tally approximately 2,000 acres in all. The city is currently in the process of developing an Open Space, Parks and Recreation Plan with a three-pronged goal of: (1) ensuring fair use, distribution and connectivity of the city's parks and recreation trails system, (2) developing uses for vacant and surplus land, and (3) protecting environmentally sensitive natural resources to allow for growth and development in appropriate areas. The city has undertaken a broad storm drainage program, specifically geared towards improving water quality and reducing total volumes of stormwater runoff.

The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy is a local non-profit group that acts in conjunction with the City of Pittsburgh to maintain, and in many cases restore, the city's Parks. The Conservancy has 8,000 volunteers. It is able to raise funds through its non-profit status. The City of Pittsburgh also has a program called the Civic LEAF Academy which gives Pittsburgh's high school and college students a behind-the-scenes look at the city government's role in developing a sustainable, green city.

Allentown

Allentown, the third-largest city in Pennsylvania with about 118,000 residents, is recognized nationally for both the quality and scope of its park system. Consisting of 26 major parks and 13 smaller parks, there are over 2,000 acres of active, passive, and natural parkland and open space. Therefore, the recreational area per 1,000 residents works out to be almost 17 acres, well over the national average of 12.4 acres. From 2010 to 2013, the annual operating budget increased by more than 70 percent from

\$1.4 million to \$2.4 million. This increase came from re-prioritizing of City budgets, not from additional income sources.

Harrisburg

Serving a regional area of about 1 million residents, the Harrisburg Department of Parks and Recreation manages 13 playgrounds, two sports fields (including the City Island Sports Complex), four large parks, and several community/recreation centers. Funding for its Parks and Recreational facilities has been in severe jeopardy for several years. No major upgrades are planned and only required maintenance items are being addressed at this time.

Several facilities, including the Reservoir Park and the City Island Sports Complex, have relatively high visitor volumes. The 20-mile Capital Greenbelt has moderately high usage. Each of these facilities has public-private partnerships and strong volunteer bases which have revenue-generating capabilities. The Reservoir Park is the largest in the city's system and covers approximately 85 acres, and its status as the home of the National Civil War Museum has increased its exposure and overall usage. The City Island Sports Complex is located on a one-mile long island in the Susquehanna River. The Complex is home to two professional sports teams, the Harrisburg Senators minor league baseball team and the City Islanders minor league soccer team.

FUNDING AND FUTURE NEEDS

A variety of funding sources provide support for Pennsylvania's green spaces. Generally, national parks and monuments are funded by the federal budget while state parks are funded by state taxes, federal grants, self-generated revenue, and donations. County and local parks are often funded by county and local taxes, state grants, self-generated revenue, and donations.

Federal Funding

Since 1965, the Federal Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) has provided \$165 million in funding for more than 1,500 projects in Pennsylvania. For the last few years, the state's yearly allocation has remained fairly consistent from \$1.2 million to \$1.4 million. Starting in 2009, the fund was augmented by royalties earned on oil drilling activities in the Gulf of Mexico, peaking at \$8.1 million that year but greatly diminished to less than \$100,000 in 2013.

State Funding

A major part of the success of Pennsylvania's parks and forests is the Keystone Recreation, Park, and Conservation Fund (Key 93), established in 1993. Since its inception, the fund has enabled the creation of 4,000 state park projects totaling \$400 million, the preservation of 130,000 acres of land, 444 trail projects, and 2,000

community park development projects throughout the state. In late 2012, the state announced an ambitious program of grants to be awarded for 49 trail projects, 79 community park projects, five river conservation projects, land conservation projects that will conserve more than 3,000 acres of open space; and 37 statewide, park, heritage, greenway and trail initiative projects. These grants will satisfactorily meet those projects identified as absolutely critical. The total amount of funding needed for these types of preservation projects is approximately \$70 million, which is slightly more than double that proposed in the 2012 grant program.

The state also owes some of the parks' success to the Growing Greener II (GGII) Act, or Act 45, through which it invested \$625 million in agricultural and environmental resources in 2005. Of that amount, \$217.5 million, including \$90 million designated for community grants, was allocated to DCNR for the following five years. Moreover, \$27.5 million went to the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission to repair fish hatcheries and aging dams and \$20 million to the Pennsylvania Game Commission for habitat-related facility upgrades and repairs. Although the GGII initiative was expected to have reached its terminus in 2010, the original amount of money has proven adequate for funding projects even until the end of 2013. Moreover, starting from that year, the fund has been receiving transfers from the revenue generated by royalties from Marcellus shale gas drilling operations amounting to \$20 million.

However, in terms of its level of general government funding in the annual state budgets, DCNR has been experiencing a funding shortfall. The agency reached a zenith in terms of funding during 2009, when the Pennsylvania state government allocated \$120 million from its general fund. By 2014, that amount was \$30 million, about a quarter of what it was granted only a few years ago.

| DCNR Budget from State Funding (2008 – 2014) | | |
|---|----------------------------|---|
| State Fiscal Year | Total State Funding | Change from Previous Fiscal Year |
| FY 2009 | \$120 million | --- |
| FY 2010 | \$92 million | - 23.3% |
| FY 2011 | \$82 million | - 10.9% |
| FY 2012 | \$55 million | - 32.9% |
| FY 2013 | \$52 million | - 5.5% |
| FY 2014 | \$30 million | - 42.3% |

Fortunately, the growth of DCNR's own sources of revenue, in the form of rental fees and gift sales, concession contracts, and Marcellus shale gas drilling royalties, offer

strong indicate that they may provide the future funding required to compensate for the lack of state funding required for the operation, maintenance, and further capital improvement of Pennsylvania's state parks, forests, and recreational areas. Currently, almost \$150 million in revenue has been raised by DCNR itself from its own activities, which far exceeds the \$63 million deficit between the funding that the agency received during 2010 and that it will receive during 2014.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The four Pennsylvania sections of ASCE recommend that the following measures be taken to maintain and enhance Pennsylvania's parks and recreation system and keep it in the forefront nationally:

- Given the general fund budget cuts that DCNR has been experiencing over the past few years, which are a result of general budget cuts to all agencies throughout the state, it is important that DCNR continue to grow its other sources of revenue. It is equally important to explore additional sources of income, particularly with respect to cabin and campsite rentals, gift shop sales, and concession contracts.
- DCNR should further promote and market its parks within and outside of Pennsylvania to generate more interest and visitors and, hence, more revenue in terms of more prospective campers and outdoor sportspeople staying and spending within the parks.
- With the growth in popularity of certain recreational activities, such as water sports, golf, whitewater rafting, and swimming within the state; it would be advisable for DCNR to further expand the facilities within its parks to take advantage of these growing sources of revenue from state park visitors.
- All of these facilities could have public private partnerships and strong volunteer bases with revenue generating capabilities. This added revenue for each has sustained, and in some cases substantially improved, the facilities.

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ASCE POLICY STATEMENTS

- ASCE Policy Statement 503: [National Parks Infrastructure \(PS 503\)](#)