

# State Parks Funding: SB 451 HB 660, 2024 General Assembly session

## Summary

Virginia's state park system, started in 1936 with five parks, now consists of 42 parks spread across the Commonwealth. New parks are added to keep pace with the population growth, as well as the expanded enthusiasm for outdoor recreation. In addition, Virginia parks are a popular tourist destination. Funding for parks has not kept pace with the demand causing both staffing shortfalls and delayed maintenance. Our parks suffer and the visitor experience is degraded. A new and reliable funding stream is needed to augment the current revenue sources. A 5% allocation from the Corporate Income Tax revenue would go a long way toward closing the funding gap for our park system.

## Background

Virginia's 42 state parks are available for the health, welfare, and enjoyment of the public. Virginia's population growth exceeds the country's growth as a whole. These magnificent and historic parks must be staffed, operated, and maintained in a fashion that ensures that all Virginia residents have affordable, safe, and enjoyable access to outdoor recreational opportunities that promote both physical and mental health. Our state parks must also provide attractive destinations for tourists, who contribute to many aspects of our state's economy. We must ensure that the outdoor experience provided by state parks is an accessible and equitable environment for all.

## Reasons to Support HB660 and SB451

- Virginia has built one of the premier State Park Systems in the country. The annual operation, and maintenance needs of these outstanding parks, however, are severely **underfunded and understaffed by 275 positions**. It is estimated that Virginia's state parks need approximately **\$111.4 million additional dollars per year** to operate effectively, while current budgets are only about \$47 million per year.
- Appropriations from the state's General Fund currently average about \$20 million of the \$47 million total budget, and this appropriation can fluctuate significantly from year to year. It is essential that this level of General-Fund support continue, and increase, going forward. In addition, new sources of reliable and **sustainable** funding need to be added.
- Revenues from park operations currently constitute about \$28 million of the \$47 million total. Such revenues come from parking fees, admission fees, cabin and camping rentals, equipment rentals, picnic shelter rentals, program fees, concession sales, and other monies paid by park visitors for services.
- As we as a society seek racial and economic justice, it is important to consider the extent to which fees may be affecting people's ability to enjoy state parks. It is arguable that entry and parking fees should be reduced or eliminated, in order to make park visitation more affordable, especially for Virginia families and individuals who lack financial resources. Even though the parks system desperately needs more money for operations and maintenance, it cannot and should not do so at the risk of disfranchising members

of the public whom the parks are designed to serve. Currently, parking fees constitute approximately \$6 million in annual state-park revenue. Therefore, this \$6 million loss should be added to the amount that needs to be generated each year by new and sustainable funding sources. **The proposed legislation will eliminate the entrance/parking fees!**

- Based on current operations and deferred maintenance needs, our state park system faces a deficit each year of over \$100 million dollars. Therefore, current funding sources are woefully inadequate, and frequently unreliable and unpredictable. Like any other business, our state park system needs to meet payroll and perform ongoing maintenance. In order to operate effectively our parks require adequate and stable funding.

### **Recommendation**

The proposed bi-partisan legislation to take 5% of the corporate income tax revenue and dedicate it to parks. It raises the funds needed to meet the present shortfall of over \$100 million dollars. Bills have been introduced in the Senate (Senator Marsden, SB 451) and the House of Delegates (Delegate Kilgore, HB 660).



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