
Virginia

Association for Parks

www.virginiaparks.org
www.virginiaoutdoors.com

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*"Supporting the Commonwealth's parks,
natural resources, and historic sites"*

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January 19, 2012

Dear Senators Reeves and Garrett:

We strongly oppose SB 571 because it undermines the public recreational opportunities and community economic support that the Virginia State Park System brings to the citizens of the Commonwealth and its out of state visitors. We respectfully ask that you withdraw this bill for the following reasons.

This legislation assumes that Virginia's state parks are competing with the private sector. In truth, those that conceived the development of a state park system in the 1920's and 30's saw state parks as a way to showcase Virginia's natural and cultural treasures while stimulating outdoor recreation and tourism spending. That has proven to be a successful approach for 75 years. State parks attract about eight million visits a year, including more than one million overnight visits. Those visitors create the demand for additional services found outside the state parks, including private campgrounds; restaurants; bait and tackle shops; ice cream parlors; sporting goods stores; outfitters for biking, paddling, power boating, fishing; and many other outdoor pursuits. It is estimated that park visitors contribute more than \$180 million in economic impact and create thousands of jobs throughout the Commonwealth.

DCR already does an annual fee review, considers what is charged by both the public and private sectors, and sets fees responsibly. In 2012 for instance, camping fees were raised \$2 per water and electric site, while primitive sites remained the same based on the need to maintain affordable camp sites for those suffering during the economic recession. Cabin rental fees were increased by 5%. There is a balance to be struck since taxpayers own the parks and fund part of the park operations. It is commonly understood that all taxpayers contribute to a park system that is for the benefit of all our citizens. Those who use the parks support the parks through user fees charged for parking, camping, and cabin rental as well as on merchandise and food they purchase. Virginia ranks 47th among the states in both per capita support for state parks and proportion of the state budget for state parks. While Virginia is one of the most frugally supported, it is also recognized as one of the best managed and best customer friendly systems in the nation. The more than 10 fold return on the taxpayers investment is vital to many of the localities where state parks exist (about \$17 million in general funds is converted into more than \$180 million in economic impact).

The role of the Commonwealth and the Department related to providing recreational pursuits on public land has been clearly articulated by the General Assembly and the citizens of the Commonwealth:

Article XI of the Virginia Constitution states “to the end that the people have clean air, pure water, and the use and enjoyment for recreation of adequate public lands, waters and other natural resources, it shall be the policy of the Commonwealth to conserve, develop and utilize its natural resources, its public lands and its historical sites and buildings.

The Code of Virginia, § 10.1-200, speaks to the powers and duty of the Department “*to facilitate and encourage the public use of parks and recreational areas, to further take advantage of the positive economic impact of outdoor recreational facilities to localities and the Commonwealth, to foster the upkeep and maintenance of such resources, andestablish and implement a long range plan (the Virginia Outdoors Plan is the states comprehensive outdoor planning document and is updated every five years) for the acquisition, maintenance, improvement, protection and conservation for public use of those areas of the Commonwealth best adapted to the development of a comprehensive system of outdoor recreation facilities in all fields, including, but not limited to: parks, forests, camping grounds, fishing and hunting grounds, scenic areas, waters and highways, boat landings, beaches and other areas of public access to navigable waters*”.

The Code of Virginia, § 10.1-200.1 establishes a State Park Master Planning process. The requirements of the planning process are significant, specific, and public. All members of the General Assembly receive plan drafts for their review and comment prior to formal adoption of the plans. At least three public meetings are held in conjunction with the development of each master plan.

As previously stated above, we strongly oppose SB 571 because it undermines the public recreational opportunities and economic support that the Virginia State Park System brings to the citizens of the Commonwealth and its out of state visitors. We respectfully ask that you withdraw the bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnny Finch".

Johnny Finch, President
Virginia Association for Parks