

State parks and forests face \$1 billion maintenance funding shortfall

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Pennsylvania's state parks and state forests contain 3,000 miles of roadways, 4,800 buildings, 860 vehicular bridges, 1,470 miles of hiking, 131 dams, 70 sewage treatment plants, 180 boat ramps, 56 swimming beaches and more than 30,000 picnic tables

But finding the money to maintain, fix and improve park and forest infrastructure and operations has not been a walk in the park and certainly no picnic.

A [new report](#) scheduled for release Monday afternoon by the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation finds that the state's systematic failure to provide adequate funding for both built and environmental infrastructure needs has created a \$1 billion maintenance backlog.

And that backlog has put at risk outdoor recreation and natural amenities in the state's parks and forests enjoyed by more than 40 million visitors a year, said Marci Mowery, president of the non-profit foundation that supports 41 volunteer organizations working in and with the state's parks and forests.

"In 2018 we celebrated the 125th anniversary of Pennsylvania's state parks and forests with all citizens of Pennsylvania, yet our parks and forests need care if we are to continue to celebrate the important roles they play in making Pennsylvania a great place to live, work and play," Ms. Mowery said in a news release marking the foundation's new infrastructure campaign.

"The legacy of Pennsylvania's state parks and forests is at risk due to inadequate funding levels to maintain and repair the bridges, roads, buildings, and recreational amenities that make our parks and forests so valuable to residents and visitors alike," she said.

With overflowing toilets and trash cans and resource destruction in some national parks among the still lingering effects of the recently ended federal government shutdown, the foundation released its report in Harrisburg to highlight the long-term and ongoing funding shortfalls facing the state's 121 parks and 20 forests covering 2.2 million acres.

The 45-page report, based on a comprehensive, year-long study of park and forest maintenance needs, found that funding for infrastructure, staffing and materials has “fallen increasingly short over the past decade,” creating an “unprecedented tally of needed investments: from bridges to wastewater treatment facilities, from dams to invasive plant removal, and from roads to trails.”

Although the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which manages the state’s parks and forests, has spent approximately \$400 million on park infrastructure maintenance and upgrades between 1995 and 2016, and \$77 million on forest improvements between 1999 and 2015, the report said, it hasn’t been able to keep up.

One reason for that is that DCNR’s General Fund budget of \$105 million is the same as it was 15 years ago and, the study said, the department has had to increasingly rely on money from the Oil and Gas Lease Fund to meet its growing spending needs.

Between 1955, when it was established, and 2017, the Oil and Gas Lease Fund generated royalty payments of more than \$1 billion for conservation purposes, including work in state parks and forests. But in 2008 the State Assembly changed the fund requirement that it be spent for conservation purposes, allowing the transfer of \$526 million to the General Fund over the next nine years.

In 2017 the state Supreme Court stopped that practice and ruled that lease fund revenues must be used for conservation and not to balance the state’s budget.

“Had the law regarding the lease fund not been changed (in 2008), hundreds of millions of dollars of rent and royalty payments would have flowed into the lease fund and been available for conservation, recreation, dam or flood control projects,” the report said.

While that ruling could significantly increase the funding available for park and forest work, the report cautioned that state courts must still decide a number of legal issues.

Terrance Brady, a DCNR spokesman, said Sunday that he has not seen the foundation report so any comment on it would be “premature.” He said DCNR officials may have additional comment after the foundation’s news conference.

“I can say the foundation is an invaluable ally of our state parks and state forests,” Mr. Brady said. “With its strong network of park ‘friends’ groups, it serves as the eyes and ears of the public, and is able to generate support through avenues and methods not open to DCNR.”

According to the report, more than 40 million people visit Pennsylvania parks and forests every year, spending more than \$1 billion in nearby communities and towns for motel rooms, food equipment and souvenirs.

The state's parks and forests also provide environmental benefits of considerable value, the report said, including water filtration, air quality improvement and flood control.

Mr. Brady said the cost of routine park and forest maintenance is spiraling, due largely to weather related events.

“You only have to look to your Point State Park where continual flood clean-ups as recent as last week were required. “

The foundation report is not the first to identify mounting maintenance needs in the state's parks. A review of park operations done in 1990 showed that a 15 year maintenance backlog had produced a \$50 million “to do” list for building and paving roads, repairing bridges and dams, restoring and renovating existing buildings, sewer and water facilities and recreational facilities.

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