

Parks decay due to budget woes

CHRIS BLANK • The Associated Press •
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KAISER, Mo. — At state parks across the nation, this is the toll of the deepening budget crisis and years of financial neglect: crumbling roads, faltering roofs, deteriorating restrooms.

Electrical and sewer systems are beginning to give out, too, as are scores of park buildings, some of them built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. In a few places, aging bridges have been detoured and tunnels blocked off because of falling debris.

The tough economy has made money scarcer for administrators at some of the country's most treasured public spaces who have been forced to postpone maintenance and construction projects, creating a huge backlog of unfinished work that would cost billions of dollars to complete.

The Associated Press sought information from park administrators across the nation and consulted researchers and published reports. An AP analysis of the data showed that the backlog of projects has ballooned to more than \$7 billion and continues to grow. New York's backlog of projects is estimated to be at least \$1 billion.

The budget for New York's state parks has been reduced by \$35 million since 2008-09, and more than 1,400 permanent and seasonal staff have been eliminated, according to the advocacy group Parks & Trails New York.

"It's basically been three steady years of decline in operating and capital budgets," said Robin Dropkin, executive director. "Like a rubber band you can stretch so far, and it busts."

The parks system enjoyed capital spending of nearly \$100 million in 2008-09 and 2009-10, but that has fallen sharply during the current budget year.

Several closures of New York parks and historic sites are under consideration, though local municipalities might be able to keep some facilities running. A planned closure of Knox Farm State Park

in Erie County could be averted if local authorities can agree on an operating plan. If the state can find private operators for **golf courses** in Cayuga and Steuben counties, they will remain open to the public next year.

Nationally, park managers say they try to funnel money to the most urgent needs. Others have received help from private groups or volunteers to tackle work they cannot afford to finish on their own.

"We do what we can," said Denny Bopp, a supervisor for the Missouri district that includes the Lake of the Ozarks State Park, more than 150 miles southwest of St. Louis. The park's centerpiece is a huge man-made reservoir that attracted more than a million fishermen, campers, boaters and vacationers in 2010.

Many states had backlogs long before the economy started to decline. But the lack of revenue has allowed more sites to decay, and no one can say how long the work will have to wait. Park officials say federal stimulus efforts have offered little help for the 6,500-plus state parks, recreation areas and historic sites in the U.S. And they contend a federal conservation fund to support recreation areas has skewed toward federal facilities.

Site managers and park advocates worry that putting off maintenance work too long risks making repair projects more expensive, just as a house in need of new shingles will eventually require an entire **roof** if the first signs of trouble are ignored.

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Dropkin said recreation areas can only be allowed to decay so far before visitors stop coming or facilities must be closed for health and safety reasons.

"Who wants to go into a restroom that is falling apart?" Dropkin said. "Who wants to drink water that may be questionable?"

More than a dozen states estimate that their backlogs are at least \$100 million. Hawaii officials called park conditions "deplorable" in a December report asking for \$50 million per year for five years to tackle a \$240 million backlog that covers parks, trails and harbors.

In Missouri, the list of repairs surpasses \$200 million. Michigan initially reported a backlog of more than \$300 million, although that may improve a little. Renovations could get under way in 2011 at a historic beach house at Ludington State Park, which has been waiting at least five years to begin the work.

"Everyone seems to have sort of similar issues: Nobody has a lot of money, and everyone has a lot of projects to do," said Will Harris, director of the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands.

Earlier this year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation declared state parks and historic sites to be among the nation's most endangered historic places. The group cited construction backlogs, park closures and other budget cuts.

Another risk is that if parks attract fewer visitors, they also bring in less money for the state and for nearby communities. The National Association of State Parks Directors estimates that the parks generate \$20 billion in economic activity annually.

Ken Caplinger, director of West Virginia's parks, said park supervisors are doing their best to avoid cutting the activities and services that are most important to visitors.

"With ingenuity and a lot of elbow grease and hard, above-and-beyond-the-call-of-duty work, you can disguise for a long time a significant lack of funding," he said. "But eventually, you have to pay the piper. Eventually it does catch up to you."

Some visitors have started to notice.

Sean George, a camper and hiker who frequently

visits Missouri's parks, said the bathrooms and other facilities can be used, but they clearly need work. Many of the sites looked like they "could use a little TLC," said George, 38, of Columbia, Mo.

"Somewhere along the line, we got behind, and it just kept getting bigger and bigger," Missouri Parks Director Bill Bryan said. "And we have to make a dent in it now."

Includes reporting by staff writer Jill Terrieri.

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