



State budget woes may make for not-so-happy campers

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MOREAU - Campgrounds at New York's state parks open for business later this week. Well, most of them will anyway.

Because of the state budget crunch, officials with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation say 11 of the 67 campgrounds maintained and operated by the office will not open this year.

With the closings, the number of campsites available through the parks department will fall from 9,400 to around 9,100, according to state officials.

The campground at Moreau Lake State Park will be open, but the shuttering of nearby facilities could mean more campers and harder-to-obtain reservations at the park.

Regional state parks with campsites slated for closure include Cherry Plain State Park in Rensselaer County and the Max V. Shaul State Park in Schoharie County.

"We did really well last year, and I have no reason to believe we won't do very well again this year," Peter Iskenderian, manager at Moreau Lake, said last week from the park, where preparations were being made for Friday's campground opening.

Statistics provided by the state underscore the camping crunch.

They show nearly 185,000 campsite reservations were made during the 2009 season, accounting for 576,000 reservation nights. The numbers are up nearly 5 percent from just five years ago.

At Moreau Lake, nearly 4,400 campsites were reserved last year - up nearly 9 percent from 2005 - according to the parks office.

The reservations produced nearly \$16.4 million in revenue for the parks system last year, an increase of around 20 percent over the last five years, but parks officials said the money still isn't enough to support the parks.

"Ultimately, what it comes down to is that revenues cover only about half of the parks' operation costs," said Dan Keefe, a spokesman for the state parks office.

State lawmakers still haven't signed off on a budget, but it may be too late for those campgrounds slated for closure to open even if funding were restored, Keefe said.

"If we can reopen them, we will, but it may be too far along at this point," he said.

The lack of a state budget is also impacting parks that are staying open.

Iskenderian said he has only been allowed to rehire those summer workers who have worked at Moreau Lake in past years. The park usually hires around 30 people to work at the beach, the welcome center and for security.

A long-planned expansion that would add 80 sites to the 148 already at Moreau Lake is also on hold.

State officials are hoping to get \$20 million from the Environmental Protection Fund this year, but the money is targeted for "health and safety" issues.

"Right now, those are just future dreams," Iskenderian said of the planned campground expansion.

Moreau Lake has, however, seen more than \$2 million in repairs in recent years, including seven new rest room facilities and new electric and water lines. A third private cabin is being built now and should be open by next season.

Robin Dropkin, the executive director at Parks & Trails New York, a parks advocacy group, said the campground closures and spending cuts may push campers to other states.

Around 350 reservations that had been made at New York campgrounds targeted for closure were voided earlier this year, and no new reservations have been accepted at those facilities.

"At some level, I think state residents care that they're camping New York but, at the end of the day, people really just want to be out in the woods, and they'll go wherever is open," Dropkin said.

One state that may be getting those campers is Vermont, where there are more than two-dozen state-run camping locations and 52 state parks.

Vermont officials have no plans to shutter any parks or campgrounds this year and have spent more than \$5.6 million on upgrades throughout the parks system in recent years, said Jason Gibbs, Commissioner for the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation.

Attendance at Vermont-run parks and campgrounds grew 10 percent statewide last year, and there are plans to make millions more in upgrades in coming years.

"In a nutshell, we are moving in a different direction than our colleagues in New York," Gibbs said. "It's unfortunate that they (New York officials) have to endure the level of cuts and closures that they are, and we hope that they'll bounce back in the near future, but in the meantime, Vermont is making a record investment in the quality of our state parks."

State cuts being made in New York aren't just impacting campgrounds at sites run by the parks office, either.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation is preparing to close seven of the 51 campgrounds it operates in the Adirondacks and Catskills this season.

Those closures include three campsites in Hamilton County and one in Essex County.

The Lake George Battleground State Park, with 68 tent sites, will not be impacted by the state cuts. It and other DEC-run campgrounds open on May 21.