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Parks In Crisis

Local Chairman Asks For Help Keeping Parks

By Nicholas L. Dean ndean@post-journal.com

POSTED: October 4, 2009

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New York's parks are in crisis, according to Dalton Burgett, chairman of the Allegany Parks Commission.

Having been cut funding and staff in recent years, the state parks system has nowhere left to trim and may soon see closures as a result of the continued budget deficit.

Hoping a grassroots campaign of e-mails, phone calls and letters will keep Gov. David Paterson from shuttering parks in 2010, Burgett said Friday that chairmen from each of the state's 10 other regions are similarly calling on residents to petition lawmakers.

"Unless the people get involved, it's going to be something like California right now - which is anticipating closing up to 100 parks," Burgett said. "It's getting serious here. It's not there yet and we're trying to stem it, but it could be. We don't have any park closures and we've already had to reduce operations in several of them, but we haven't had to close a park yet per se."

LOCALLY

The Allegany Parks Commission represents not only Allegany State Park, but also Midway, Long Point and Lake Erie state parks.

The chairpersons of each of the state's 11 region commissions are appointed by the governor to 7-year terms.

According to Burgett, commissions have some latitude when it comes to setting park rules for their region, but mostly, the commissions serve as advocacy groups.

"Our job is to sort of represent the people," Burgett said. "The parks are probably the most popular agency of government."

"Everybody loves the parks and with the economy the way it has been, a lot of people who would otherwise go on a more extensive vacation, low income people especially, take great advantage of the parks. It's going to be a serious and tragic situation if this keeps going."

Each year, New York state parks see close to 55 million visitors. Allegany State Park alone, which is the largest contiguous state park in size east of the Mississippi and third largest in the United States, hosted more than 1.9 million visitors last year. After taking over Midway in 2004, Burgett said the state saw more than 10,000 people visitor during its first season.

STATEWIDE SITUATION

In the past two years, the New York State Office Of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has seen its budget cut back by 20 percent.

According to Burgett, 43 percent of the office's \$355 million budget comes from revenues generated by the parks themselves. However, reductions in state funding forces the parks to operate shorter hours and shorter seasons - thus generating less revenue.

"All of a sudden to have us cut back and start shutting the doors at parks, in my judgment and I think in all the parks charimen's and all the parks people, would be counterproductive because that income is going to be reduced," Burgett said. "There are some agencies you can trim down and you're not going to lose income because they're fully funded. But ours, if you start cutting back on parks, you're going to cut back on the people that use them. You're going to cut back on the revenues they generate."

In recent years, the state parks have lost 850 of the 2,100 permanent staff and 5,000 seasonal staff they employed only a year or two ago, according to Burgett. A hiring freeze keeps parks from employing staff necessary to keep parks open longer to generate more revenue.

Citing a March 2009 study prepared by the University of Massachusetts Amherst Political Economy Research Institute for the Parks and Trails of New York, a watchdog-type advocacy group, Burgett said state parks produce about \$1.9 billion in annual sales for nearby private businesses. Additionally, the state receives \$5 for every \$1 it spends to maintain the parks through such visitor expenditures.

Though certainly worthwhile, according to Burgett, the state is starting to draft its plan for closures. Rather than wait until an attempt is made to close parks, Burgett said he and other region commissioners are



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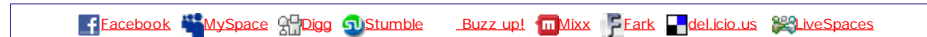


doing what they can to alert people to the situation at hand.

"No matter what the crisis is up there, we didn't create it," Burgett said. "Why should the people suffer even more from an agency that gives them so much."

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Brent1

10-05-09 2:13 PM [»Report Abuse](#)
SouthernTier said: it's a park. The tress will still grow and the streams will still run without any human intervention. You might have to close the laundry facility and the store, but so what. If need be, just throw open the gates 24/7/365 and let people use it.

AMEN! I have never gone to visit a park employee... get rid of them all but the cop...

JECaflisch

10-05-09 1:18 PM [»Report Abuse](#)
LindaD... Long Point State Park is deserted and the old Minturn Mansion is falling down. Midway could have been a great tourist attraction with private investment providing real jobs. Instead, the State is squandering taxpayer dollars to create something no one will use.

LindaD

10-05-09 12:47 PM [»Report Abuse](#)
"It's too bad the Walsh family wouldn't consider talking to my group of private investors when Midway was for sale. We had a lot of \$\$\$ lined up to keep Midway in private holdings with enuf \$\$ to make ALL the improvements needed and wanted. Sorry NY but I agree. The state should NOT be in the business of running an amusement park." -- massa9148

Ah, yes, so the amusement park can be shuttered and the public barred from lake access so you could sell it off to out-of-state condo owners. Yes ... infinitely a better outcome. NOT.

MASS9148

10-05-09 11:05 AM [»Report Abuse](#)
It's too bad the Walsh family wouldn't consider talking to my group of private investors when Midway was for sale. We had a lot of \$\$\$ lined up to keep Midway in private holdings with enuf \$\$ to make ALL the improvements needed and wanted. Sorry NY but I agree. The state should NOT be in the business of running an amusement park.

SouthernTier

10-04-09 6:29 PM [»Report Abuse](#)
First off, 'localcitizen' is wrong about ASP being the 3rd largest park in the US. It is the 3rd largest in NY -- after ADK and the Catskill park.

Second off, it's a park. The tress will still grow and the streams will still run without any human intervention. You might have to close the laundry facility and the store, but so what. If need be, just throw open the gates 24/7/365 and let people use it. NBD.

localcitizen

10-04-09 4:05 PM [»Report Abuse](#)
The article of a possible closing Allegany State Park should be considered closing. I can't imagine it being considered - closing a park larger then a couple US state - the third largest in the United States in incomprehensible. I have been a visitor since 1990 and have viewed enjoyment in scenery = wildlife - clean water swimming - fishing along with with an extensive list of other enjoyable pleasures. Think carefully before we allow this jewel to cease...

johnee

10-04-09 3:48 PM [»Report Abuse](#)
They can close Midway and it would be no loss. The state should not be running a amusement park.

JECaflisch

10-04-09 8:46 AM [»Report Abuse](#)
Dalton Burgett should accept much of the blame for his empire building which includes the acquisition of Midway Park.

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