



# HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Missouri Parks Association  
Post Office Box 8531, Kansas City, MO 64114

Volume 44, No. 1

March, 2026

Greg Iffrig and Shirley Wolverson, Guest Editors

## 2026 Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax Renewal

by Kendra Varns Wallis

In 2026, Missouri voters will once again be asked to decide the future of one of the state's most successful and enduring public investments: the Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax. Appearing on the general election ballot as Constitutional Amendment 1, the measure asks whether Missouri should continue, for another 10 years, the one-tenth-of-one-percent sales and use tax dedicated equally to Missouri State Parks and the state's Soil and Water Conservation Program.

For more than four decades, this modest tax has quietly delivered extraordinary benefits. It has preserved free access to one of the nation's top-ranked state park systems, reversed severe soil erosion across Missouri farmland, and generated massive economic returns for communities statewide.

**Amendment 1 does not create a new tax;** it simply renews a proven, voter-approved investment that Missourians have repeatedly endorsed.

**A Tax Born of Crisis—and Stewardship.** The Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax traces its roots to the early 1980s, a time of financial crisis for Missouri State Parks and alarming soil decline and corresponding decrease in water quality resulting from excessive surface runoff across the state. By 1983, the state parks budget had been cut to less than half of what it had been just three years earlier, prompting serious discussions about closing parks or transferring them to other agencies. At the same time, Missouri ranked second highest in the nation for soil erosion.

In response, agricultural leaders joined forces with citizen groups interested in outdoor activities, such as camping, hiking and fishing, and historical preservation.

The Missouri Parks Association, founded in 1982, worked with groups such as the Missouri Farm Bureau and the Conservation Federation of Missouri to

pursue a dedicated, voter-approved funding source. Their citizens' initiative petition efforts culminated in the first statewide vote on the tax in August 1984. The measure passed narrowly, with just over 50 percent approval, and included a five-year sunset. It enabled saving the soil and water of this state for the conservation of the productive power of Missouri agricultural land, and the continued acquisition, development, maintenance, and operation of Missouri's state parks and state historic sites.



When the five-year sunset approached without a legislative solution, threatening the renewal of the tax, citizens again stepped up with an initiative petition—collecting more than 300,000 signatures to place the tax back on the ballot in 1988. That time, voters approved a 10-year renewal by a commanding two-to-one margin. It was renewed again in 1996, and then in 2005 the Missouri legislature was asked to change the procedure for the ongoing renewal of the parks-and-soils sales tax. With voters' approval, the constitution was amended in 2006 so that in the future the tax would automatically be placed on the ballot for renewal every ten years, without the lengthy initiative petition process. This preserved the accountability feature of the parks-and-soils sales tax without the constant cycle of signature-gathering needed for initiative petitions. Subsequent renewal in 2016 passed with even greater support, earning approval from 80 percent of voters statewide, including in every county.

(See “Sales Tax” on Page 4)

## Doug Eiken (1942–2025): A Life in Service to Parks and People

By Kendra Varns Wallis

Doug Eiken, nationally respected park leader and tireless advocate for public lands, passed away on August 31, 2025. His life's work—spanning small-town North Dakota roots to leadership of major state park systems—reflected a deep belief that parks exist for ordinary people seeking renewal from the demands of everyday life.

From February 1981 to March 1994, Doug served as the Director of the North Dakota Department of Parks and Recreation. In 1994, Doug became director of Missouri State Parks. The system was facing leadership instability and severe flood damage when he arrived, but Doug embraced the challenge. He would serve for fifteen years, becoming the longest-serving director in Missouri state parks history and, counting his North Dakota tenure, the longest-serving state park director in the nation at the time of his retirement in 2009.

He was drawn to Missouri's park system for its combination of natural areas, historic sites, and recreational facilities forming a system that reflected the state's total culture. He also admired the strong public support for parks, including the Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax, which voters renewed by overwhelming margins twice during his tenure.

Doug served under five Missouri governors from both political parties, guiding the system through major ADA improvements, recovery from the devastating dam failure and flood at

Johnson's Shut-Ins, and two successful statewide sales tax renewals. Yet his philosophy was always rooted in the perspective of what he called "the little guy"—working families who depend on parks for affordable recreation and respite.



He championed inclusivity, seeing ADA compliance not as a burden but as an opportunity to open parks to more visitors. He expanded outreach to urban communities, supported youth programming for underserved populations, and strengthened interpretation of Indigenous history. He emphasized public input, data-driven decision-making, and customer satisfaction—efforts that resulted in user satisfaction rates approaching 99 percent.

Doug's tenure also brought meaningful growth to the system, including the addition of seven new parks and historic sites—Route 66 State Park, Morris State Park, Ted and Pat Jones-Confluence Point State Park, Clark's Hill/Norton State Historic Site, Current River State Park, Katy Trail State Park, and Island Mound State Historic Site—as well as securing an agreement

for public use of trails within the 61,000-acre Roger Pryor Pioneer Backcountry.

One of his proudest achievements, however, was preparing the next generation of leaders. Anticipating a wave of retirements, Doug reorganized the parks division to emphasize mentorship and leadership development. He established the Joe Jaeger Academy to equip staff with strong management skills and a deep understanding of the traditions of Missouri's park system.

Nationally, Doug's influence was equally significant. As a past executive director and president of National Association of State Outdoor Recreation Liaison Officers and NASPD, he advocated tirelessly for sustainable park funding. He played a key role in the effort to secure permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund through the Great American Outdoors Act in 2020—an achievement that will benefit public lands for generations.

His work not only strengthened and expanded our parks but also inspired generations of park professionals and advocates. For those of us who had the privilege of working alongside him, Doug's passion, integrity, and steady leadership were truly exceptional. His legacy lives on in the parks he improved, the leaders he mentored, and the millions of visitors who continue to find renewal in the public lands he so faithfully served.

## UPOP Celebrates 26 Years of Connecting Youth with Missouri's State Parks

The Underserved Populations Outreach Program (UPOP), launched in 2000 and sponsored annually by MPA, provides funding to partner organizations for field trips and educational experiences in Missouri state parks and historic sites for underserved youth. This summer, MPA is supporting programs through partner organizations in Columbia, Kansas City, Salem, and St. Louis.

UPOP creates opportunities for young people to explore Missouri's diverse natural communities through guided experiences that help reduce fears of the outdoors. By offering positive first experiences in parks, the program helps bridge the "nature gap" in outdoor access. These experiences also support youth development by encouraging engagement with nature while fostering problem-solving skills and intellectual, social, emotional, and physical growth.

Dr. Suzan Schuetz is the UPOP coordinator for the Columbia area. Children often experience nature with a sense of curiosity, creativity, and wonder. For Dr. Schuetz, who grew up exploring the forests, rocks, and rivers of southern Missouri, these moments reflect the importance of connecting young people with the natural world. Inspired by the imagination and joy she sees in children at play outdoors, she wrote the following poem to celebrate that spirit of discovery.

### *I Am Connor's Cave*

I have stood here for centuries, carved by water and time, my walls etched with stories older than memory. I am Connor's Cave, at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park. I am cool, quiet, and patient. I have watched as raccoons drink from my cave stream, frogs gather on my cool floor, and birds nest at my entrance...but nothing stirs my stillness quite like the arrival of children.

They come with laughter that echoes through my chambers, with eyes wide as lanterns; most have never been beneath the earth's surface before. Their footsteps tap out rhythms on my stone and watery floor, and their questions flutter like bats—curious, intentional, and bold. Some whisper to me, testing their voices against my echoes. Others run their fingers along my damp walls, as if trying to read the language of the earth. I am not just a place. I am a keeper of moments, a witness to discovery.

I listen. I hold their wonder. I offer shadows and

a reflective light show at my terminal pool. In return, they gift me stewardship. As these children age, I know their early experiences here have instilled a respect for me and my inhabitants. When they were here, and at other parts of the park, the children formed connections to nature, and will continue to visit, use, support, and care about the resources of MO State Parks.

And so, when the children come, I open myself to them—not with words, but with mystery. I become a classroom, a playground, a sanctuary. Each visit leaves behind a trace, not in stone, but in spirit and hope for the future.

*Help us continue connecting underserved youth with Missouri's parks—please consider making a donation to support UPOP.*

<https://missouriparksassociation.org/donate>

---

## MPA Endowment Fund Grants Awarded

Missouri Parks Association has awarded grants for 2026 from its Endowment fund.

The fund's annual earnings, up to 4 percent, support projects that benefit Missouri State Parks and nonprofit partners across the state. These funds help strengthen programs and initiatives that expand access, enhance education, and encourage stewardship of Missouri's state parks and historic sites.

MPA reinvests its endowment earnings into meaningful projects that support park visitors, communities, and partners working to preserve Missouri's outstanding state park system. This program is made possible by our generous donors.

This year's grant recipients include:

**Cole Camp Community Betterment Association** – Trail development project at **Rock Island Trail State Park**.

**Friends of Hawn** – Equipment to assist with trail maintenance at **Hawn State Park**.

**Open Space Council** – Invasive species removal project at **Route 66 State Park**.

**DarkSky International** – Responsible Lighting in Missouri State Parks project.

### ("Sales Tax" from Page 1)

**The Backbone of Missouri State Parks.** Today, the Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax provides approximately 75 percent of the operating budget for Missouri State Parks. The balance of funds comes largely from user fees—such as camping, lodging, and rentals—and federal sources. No general revenue funds are used in the state park budget. Notably, Missouri is one of only a handful of states that charges no general admission fee to its state parks, a distinction made possible by this tax.

That free access is no small matter. Missouri's state parks and historic sites welcome nearly 20 million visitors annually, ranking among the top 10 state park systems in the nation for attendance. According to a 2012 study, those visits generate more than \$1 billion in economic impact each year, largely benefiting private businesses near parks. For every \$1 invested in Missouri State Parks, approximately \$26 is returned to the state's economy.

Missouri State Parks continue to thrive thanks to effective management, committed staff, invaluable volunteer support, and innovative partnerships. The system's excellence has earned national recognition, with Missouri selected as a finalist a record seven times for the prestigious Gold Medal Award from the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration.

**Conserving the Land That Sustains Us.** The other half of the sales tax supports Missouri's Soil and Water Conservation Program, delivered locally through 114 Soil and Water Conservation Districts. These programs provide voluntary, cost-share assistance to landowners and farmers, encouraging conservation practices that protect natural resources while maintaining productive farmland. Like the Division of State Parks, the soil and water conservation program is administered by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, not Missouri Department of Conservation.

Supported practices include erosion control measures such as terraces, grassed waterways, and sediment basins; water quality protections through nutrient and waste management; and land productivity improvements like cover crops and planned grazing systems.

Since 1984, Missouri farmers have implemented more than 295,000 structural and management conservation practices across cropland, hayland, pastureland, and woodlands. These efforts have prevented an estimated 194 million tons of soil from eroding—enough to fill the lanes of I-70 from St. Louis to Kansas City more than 52 feet high.

**A Small Cost, A Big Return.** For the average Missourian, the cost of the Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax amounts to roughly \$10 per year—about the price of a single park entrance fee in many other states. In return, citizens receive free access to exceptional outdoor and historic resources, cleaner water, healthier soils, and a stronger tourism-driven economy.

Importantly, this tax is citizen-driven. Every 10 years, voters are given the opportunity to reaffirm or reject the investment. Each time the question has been asked, Missourians have answered with growing confidence that the benefits far outweigh the cost.

As Amendment 1 appears on the ballot in 2026, supporters are once again urging strong public support. The Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax is not just about recreation or agriculture, it is about quality of life, environmental stewardship, and economic vitality across the Show-Me State. For a few dollars a year, Missourians protect their natural heritage, support working lands, and ensure that future generations can enjoy free access to some of the finest state parks in the nation.

#### How You Can Help

**Donate.** Consider contributing or ask your organization to donate, to help expand outreach efforts. Send checks to: Citizens Committee for Soil, Water, and State Parks, P.O. Box 2113, Jefferson City, MO 65102

**Spread the word.** Talk about the importance of Missouri's state parks and the Soil and Water Conservation Program at meetings of conservation, civic, business, or other groups you attend.

**Engage publicly.** Write letters to the editor or use social media to encourage friends and colleagues to support the cause.

**Vote** and encourage others to vote.

To request handouts, a speaker, or assistance with social media or letters to the editors contact [info@missouriparks.org](mailto:info@missouriparks.org).

## Park Briefs

**Reducing Deer Populations.** Fourteen state parks were temporarily closed to the public in November 2025 for managed deer hunts coordinated between the Division of State Parks (DSP) and the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) to safely and effectively manage the parks' deer population. Missouri state parks are usually wildlife refuges where hunting is not permitted. However, when an overpopulation of deer develops, as it did in 2025, DNR and MDC hold special managed hunts. Studies at the parks determined the deer population showed an overcrowded number of deer per acre. Reducing the number of deer in the area through a managed hunt will help other wildlife and the ecosystem. The participating hunters were selected by MDC.

### First Day Hikes.

On January 1, 2026, almost 1,300 hikers of all ages joined 34 different hikes in state parks across Missouri.



**360-Degree Virtual Tours** are currently available for 21 state parks and historic sites. If you want to preview a park to visit, reminisce about one you enjoyed in the past, or just like armchair tours, visit <https://mostateparks.com/page/mo-virtual-heritage> to view the selection.

**Rock Island Trail State Park.** Two historic central Missouri communities, Versailles and Cole Camp, celebrated an important milestone on Friday, October 17, with groundbreaking ceremonies marking the next phase of development for Rock Island Trail State Park, Missouri's 93rd and newest state park. Held in both communities, the events reflected growing statewide momentum to transform the former Rock Island Railroad corridor into a multi-use recreational trail that will reconnect 23 Missouri communities. For more information on project progress, visit <https://rockislandtrail.org/news>.

**Park Centennials.** *Montauk State Park* will have special events to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of becoming a state park. The first will be Old Mill Days, May 8-9, 2026. *Sam A. Baker State Park* will celebrate 100 years as a Missouri State Park on June 13, 2026. This celebration will feature a variety of activities relating to the

park's natural and cultural history, as well as bluegrass music. The CCC Lodge will be open for self-guided tours, and van tours will take visitors up to the Mudlick Mountain Fire Tower. **For these and other park events**, including monthly bison saunters, Dark Sky programs, and basket weaving classes, go to <https://mostateparks.com/upcoming-events/all>.

### January 2026 Revenue Bond Project Update.

In the July 2025 issue of *Heritage*, we reported the completion of seven revenue bond projects. Since that time, an additional five projects have been completed. For more information on all 28 revenue bond projects at 22 different parks, visit <https://mostateparks.com/basic-page/revenue-bonds>.

- At **Lake of the Ozarks State Park**, 29 campsites were converted into 25 full-service campsites (sewer, 50-amp electric, water) and four yurts were constructed.
- Five campsites were converted into five new premium yurts at **Table Rock State Park**. They include two bedrooms; air-conditioning and heating; full bathroom with tub and shower; a kitchen with a four-burner electric stove and oven, full-size refrigerator, microwave, coffee maker and toaster; living room with a queen-size sleeper sofa; and televisions in the bedrooms and living room.
- A new campground was added at **Weston Bend State Park** with fifteen full-service campsites (sewer, 50-amp electric, water) and a small shower house.
- **Lewis and Clark State Park** converted twenty existing campsites to full-service (sewer, 50-amp electric, water) and added a small shower house.
- **Echo Bluff State Park** built two new four-bedroom cabins and four new two-bedroom cabins.



*Lewis and Clark State Park Campground*



Post Office Box 8531  
Kansas City, MO 64114

March 2026

NON PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
COLUMBIA, MO  
PERMIT #286

Return Service Requested

*2026 Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax  
Park Briefs  
MPA's 2025 Employee of the Year*

*[www.missouriparksassociation.org](http://www.missouriparksassociation.org)*

---

## **MPA's 2025 Employee of the Year Award**

Kimberly Pedigo, assistant manager at Stockton State Park, exemplifies the very best of Missouri State Parks and is the deserving recipient of MPA's 2025 State Park Employee of the Year Award. Her dedication, innovation, and leadership have made a lasting impact at Stockton State Park and across the entire park system. Kimberly received the award at the 2026 State Park Employee Conference in January, where she was honored by MPA with a commemorative plaque and a cash prize in recognition of her outstanding contributions.

In 2023, Kimberly led a multi-department Show Me Challenge team focused on improving visitor safety by addressing the lack of audible storm warning sirens in state parks where cell phone reception is unreliable. While maintaining her regular duties during peak season, she coordinated research, surveys, and meetings with emergency managers, park staff, and National Weather Service meteorologists. The Show Me Sirens team earned a second-place finish, and her efforts have already resulted in the installation of storm sirens in state parks, like the two that were installed at Bennett Spring State Park, and one at Stockton State Park (pictured).

At Stockton State Park, Kimberly's professionalism is reflected in consistently positive guest feed-

back regarding campground cleanliness and host friendliness. She also excels in natural resource stewardship, achieving significant reductions in invasive species such as sericea lespedeza, multi-flora rose, and tree of heaven in targeted areas.

Kimberly actively pursues professional growth, having participated in the DNR Leadership Institute and State Park Legacy Academy, and was selected to attend the National Association of State Park Directors' State Park Leadership School (2026/2027). She regularly develops high-quality interpretive programs, successfully writes grants, seeks opportunities to learn from other parks across the state, and recently celebrated her 10-year anniversary with Missouri State Parks.

Well-respected and well-loved by staff and volunteers, Kimberly is known for her professionalism, friendliness, and willingness to go the extra mile. Her commitment to people, public safety, and stewardship of Missouri's natural and cultural resources makes her stand out among her peers and a true asset to Missouri State Parks.

