

Park Funding Coalition Spurred By Layoff Shock

Representatives of more than twenty citizen organizations have joined forces in a coalition to advocate for \$80 to \$100 million for state park capital improvements in a Fifth State Building Fund bond issue reintroduced in the current session of the Missouri General Assembly. It often takes an acute crisis to spur action, and that wake-up call came last October in the area of park operations devastated by the current economic downturn rather than in the backlog of vital infrastructure needs that has been inexorably building for more than fifteen years.

The crisis occurred in mid-October when 121 full time equivalent (FTE) positions were eliminated from a merit system work force of about 600 in response to a dramatic downturn in park sales tax revenues, which fund more than 75 percent of the state park budget. News of the terminations sent shock waves throughout

the park system and the ranks of park supporters statewide.

As it happened, the Missouri Parks Association annual meeting was scheduled the weekend of October 24-25 at Babler State Park with the park funding crisis as the theme. Though the system's \$200 million backlog in vitally needed infrastructure rehabilitation had been expected to take center stage—and it did when Representative Chris Kelly said that he planned to reintroduce the capital improvements bond issue and that he was open to parks being included—the focus quickly expanded to include the layoffs. After intense and at times heated discussion with newly appointed state park director Bill Bryan, deputy Dan Paige, and DNR director Mark Templeton—who to their credit participated fully and openly in the meeting and won regard from many attendees—the MPA board approved

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Babler State Park Hosts MPA Annual Meeting

By B. H. Rucker

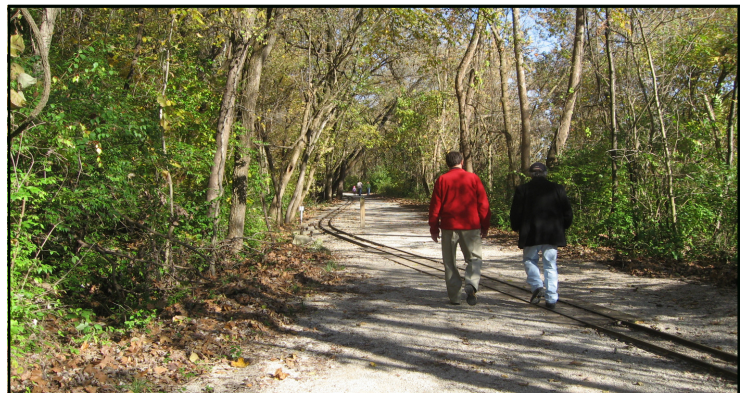
As they do every fall, the board and membership of the Missouri Parks Association enjoyed a weekend of immersion in state park issues and pleasures. This year the annual meeting was held October 25-26 at Babler State Park, one of the system's older units and a treasure trove of 1930s CCC masonry and timber architecture, nestled in mature woodland settings.

As has been traditional, Saturday morning offered the opportunity to meet new friends and greet old ones over coffee and pastries while the discussion panelists were preparing to hold forth. In his "State of the Parks" address, new state parks director Bill Bryan introduced himself

to the members and related some of his background and goals for his administration of the park system.

He also contributed

to the panel discussing state park funding, along with Deputy Director Dan Paige, Conservation Federation Director Dave Murphy, Representative Chris Kelly, and MPA's Susan Flader. They presented different views of the state parks funding



MPA members walk along the Al Foster Trail in Castlewood State Park.

problem, but were in common agreement that new funding initiatives were needed.

Following the panel discussion, the members enjoyed a cold cuts and salad luncheon while being

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a resolution expressing strong support for park employees and asking Governor Nixon and DNR leadership to seek more creative solutions to the crisis, including closure of all parks and furloughing employees for one to two months—a move that would surely have captured public attention and that might have been able to buy time for more orderly downsizing without the long-term consequences of such massive layoffs (see "Layoffs" on page 6).

Park director Bill Bryan, who had had the unenviable task of announcing the layoff process—even though the specific positions for elimination or reduction were apparently selected by other park leaders over the course of several months before his arrival—began moving immediately on a number of initiatives to help augment funding for both general operations and capital improvements. A State Park Youth Corps program will employ 1000 young people in the parks this summer with federal funds through the Department of Economic Development. Some \$2.5 million is being made available through EIARA for water projects and \$1.4 million through MoDOT for three Katy Trail bridge and culvert projects. And various fees for campsites, tours, and other services will be increased modestly. Other initiatives would require legislative approval, including a measure to retain interest on the Park Earnings Fund within the fund (rather than sweeping it to general revenue from which parks do not benefit) and one to provide for a differential fee for out-of-state off-road vehicles. There is also some legislative interest in taxing internet sales as a measure of equity for Missouri's retail merchants. Such measures may cumulatively increase park system revenues by several million dollars, which will certainly help operationally, but they will hardly deal with the \$200 million backlog of capital improvements.

Spurred by the layoff crisis, representatives of a dozen citizen conservation groups participating in a workshop on state parks and other public lands at the annual Missouri Environmental Summit on November 7 urged establishment of a broader coalition to work on the park funding issue. Because the dedicated Park Sales Tax had provided the bulk of operational support ever since general revenue for employee salaries and benefits was stripped in 1989 and the legislature could not be expected to reinstate general revenue for parks at a time when all state agencies were suffering so



Park funding panel participants (l-r) State Representative Chris Kelly, MPA's Susan Flader, DSP's Dan Paige and CFM's David Murphy.

acutely, it made sense for a coalition to lend greater support to the effort to include parks in a state bond issue for capital improvements that MPA had begun virtually alone during the last legislative session.

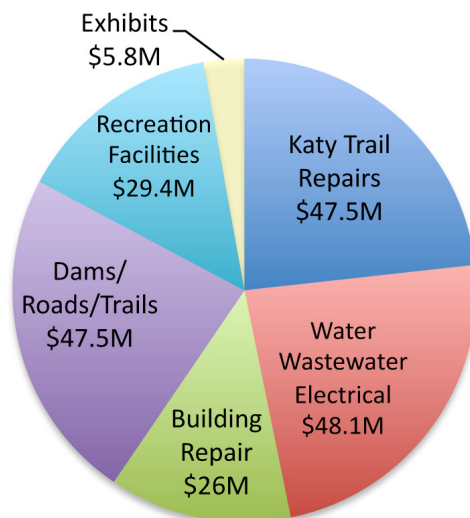
MPA hosted an organizing meeting for the new coalition in Jefferson City on December 11, attended by representatives of more than twenty citizen groups. In addition to leaders of MPA and friends groups for parks such as Arrow Rock, Battle of Lexington, Deutschheim, Katy Trail, Missouri Mines, Rock Bridge, and Watkins Mill, attendees included leaders of Audubon Missouri, Conservation Federation of Mis-

souri, Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation, Missouri Coalition for the Environment, Missouri Park and Recreation Association, Missouri Preservation Alliance, Scenic Missouri, Sierra Club, and others. MPA president Susan Flader and CFM executive director David Murphy co-chair the coalition.

Attendees at the December 11 session and a follow-up coalition meeting on January 11 were stunned by a slide presentation of infrastructure problems in state parks: crumbling dams and roads, cracked and blocked culverts, deeply rutted trails, ancient

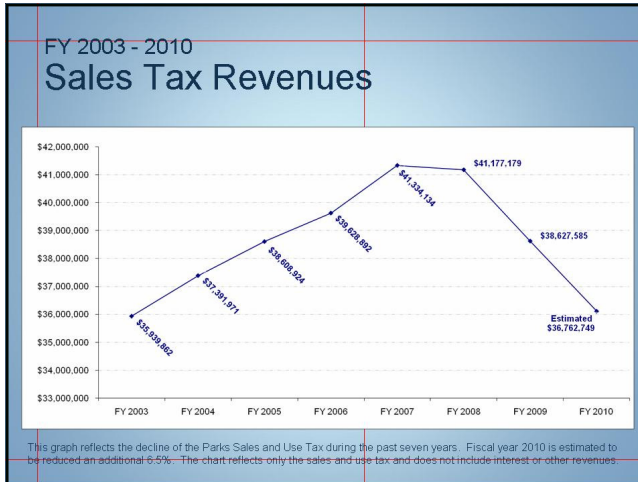
sewage lagoons, decrepit water pumps and electrical controls, fire-gutted buildings, leaking roofs, ancient kitchens, tired old exhibits, flood-damaged restrooms. The list goes on and on. For every water system, cabin, trail or exhibit that needs rehabilitation there are others in fine shape, but in a system with 1,845 structures (700 of them historic), 56 water and 96 park-owned sewer systems, more than 3,600 campsites, fourteen 1930s-era group camps that sleep more than 1,250, more than 400 lodging units and staff residences, 300 miles of roads, nearly 1000 miles of trails, 567 bridges and 1000 culverts, and 34 visitor centers and museums, the need for constant upkeep and renewal far outpaces

Capital Improvement Needs



the capacity of the park sales tax. The problem has been growing for years, so that a system with a combined annual operating and CI budget of less than \$50 million a year now has a backlog of more than \$200 million in capital improvements. Hence the need for a substantial infusion of CI funds through a bond issue, and for a broad-based coalition to advocate for it.

Park sales tax revenues, FY 2003 - 2010



In mid-January Representatives Chris Kelly (D) and Steven Tilley (R) with a bipartisan group of fifty other co-sponsors introduced House Joint Resolution 77 in the same form as the Fifth State Building Fund bond issue for higher education had ended last spring, amended in the Senate Appropriations Committee to include up to \$250 million for other state agencies, for a total of \$800 million.

The Park Funding Coalition will seek to have HJR 77 amended to specify at least 10 percent (\$80 to \$100 million) for state parks.

A Fifth State Building Fund, if approved this year, would likely qualify as Build America Bonds, for which 35 percent of the interest for the life of the bonds could be paid by federal stimulus funds, and it could utilize the annual revenue stream freed by the impending retirement of the Third State Building Fund. Hence an argument can be made that it will require **no new taxes**. The logic for including ten percent for state parks stems from both the magnitude of park needs and the fact that parks received ten percent of the Third State Building Fund in the mid-1980s. That was the last major infusion of capital funds into the park system. Moreover, if

the joint resolution passes both the House and Senate it would still have to be approved by a vote of the citizenry, so the remarkable 71 percent "yes" vote in the 2006 renewal of the Parks and Soils Sales Tax is a major selling point for including a generous amount for state parks.

The bond issue received bipartisan support in the last session of the General Assembly, passing the House and being reported out of the Senate Appropriations Committee before it was withdrawn in the closing days of the session under threat of filibuster. Governor Nixon, who did not take a position on the measure during the session last year, expressed his support of a bond issue last summer and again in October, when he suggested in a meeting with the *Kansas City Star* that such a bond issue might well include \$100 million for state parks as well as funds for mental health, law enforcement and higher education.

In this political year when the federal debt is such a major issue, it can be expected that some legislators may try to argue against a bond issue on the grounds of state debt, even though the state has always had a succession of bond issues for capital improvements but is required to balance its budget each year. That is why the coalition is encouraging members of their organizations and all Missourians who love their state parks to talk with their representatives and senators about the issue.

What You Can Do

***Write, call, or visit.* Most important, write or call your state representative and senator or go to visit them at their office hours in the district to tell them of your concerns about state parks. Seek their support for an amendment to HJR 77 to include ten percent of the total bond issue for state park capital improvements.**

***Conservation Lobby Day.* Then, join more than a hundred of your fellow citizens at Conservation Lobby Day on Wednesday, February 3, 9am to 3:30pm, Governor Office Building, Room 450, 200 Madison St., Jefferson City. State park funding will be one of the featured issues on which attendees will be briefed and urged to discuss with legislators. Register by February 1 (www.moenvirom.org/Lobbyday.aspx) or at the door.**

***Make a donation.* The state park system has set up a simple on-line system to donate to state parks. Just go to www.mostatoparks.com/donations.htm.**

The Wonder of the World Outdoors: Q & A with Brian Stith

Brian Stith is the Field Operations Coordinator for the Eastern Parks District and lives in St. Louis with his family. He represents the fourth generation of his family to work in, as well as love, Missouri state parks. His interview with MPA board member Mary Barile is the first in a series about park employees. Who have you met in the parks that you think would make a good subject for a future issue of *Heritage*? Please send your suggestions to Mary Barile at mmb3367@earthlink.net.



Brian Stith explains special park facilities at Babler to an MPA group.

When did you begin working for DNR?

I began working for the Department of Natural Resources July 10, 1995. It was at the Missouri State Museum in Jefferson City as the Assistant Historic Site Administrator in charge of the State Capitol Tour Program. From 1988 - 1992, prior to working for DNR, I was a seasonal tour guide for the Friends of Arrow Rock, where I gave guided tours and historic interpretive programs.

Your family has strong connections to Missouri parks, don't they?

My mother, Mary Stith, worked as seasonal tour guide at Arrow Rock State Historic Site from 1989 until she retired in August 2006 as an Interpretive Resource Technician. My sister, Pamela Muren, worked as an

environmental engineer in the DNR Division of Environmental Quality's Air Program from January 1994 to September 2004. My paternal grandfather Bob Stith worked as the Superintendent at Arrow Rock from approximately 1958 – 1972, and my maternal great grandfather Lester Dixon was park superintendent at Arrow Rock from 1943 - 1954.

When did you discover the Missouri outdoors?

I grew up on a 320-acre farm outside of Arrow Rock, where I learned how to hunt and fish. My family usually spent our summer vacations visiting state parks and historic sites throughout Missouri. I have always enjoyed hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, camping, canoeing, and playing numerous outdoor sports. My wife and I both love the outdoors. We try to spend as much time as possible with our two young children visiting parks, walking trails, riding bikes, playing sports, and enjoying nature. One of our favorite activities is canoeing. Now that both of our children are learning to swim, we look forward to sharing this experience with them as a family. We also are looking forward to our first family camping outing later this year at a state park yet to be determined.

What makes Missouri so special to you and your family?

I think Missouri is special because of the extreme diversity of its natural and cultural resources. From rivers and forests, to caves, historic mills and civil war battlefields, there is something for everyone to experience. My favorite outdoor spot is the Missouri River overlook near the main picnic shelter at Arrow Rock. It seems as though I spent my entire childhood playing at the nearby playground, walking the trails, and exploring the bluffs. There was probably a time when I could have navigated those bluff trails with my eyes closed. I have so many memories of that spot, from family reunions to 4-H outings to picnics and camp-outs with friends. I can remember coming to the overlook after dark and just sitting and watching the barges navigate the river below. It's a very peaceful spot where I hold a lot of fond memories.

Your most memorable outdoor Missouri experience?

Without a doubt, my most memorable outdoor experience was working the St. Louis WOW (Wonders of the Outdoor World) event in 2005 at Forest Park. At St. Louis WOW we teach outdoor activities and skills to families and individuals who have had little or no

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entertained by park naturalist Hannah Rennard, who related the history of Dr. Edmund A. Babler State Park. She spoke about the enormous generosity of Edmund and Jacob Babler, the one in caring for the indigent poor and the other by endowing Missourians with this wonderful park. Her program also highlighted the variety of flora and fauna that visitors to Babler may experience. Reed Detring, superintendent of the ONSR, also spoke briefly about current issues in the Riverways.

After lunch, the whole crowd embarked on a caravan exploration of the park and was shown some of the best examples of "parkitecture," as the rustic stone and timber mode of CCC construction has been dubbed. They particularly enjoyed the old stable, which is now used for education with small group work spaces in the horse stalls. Brian Stith of the park division's St. Louis office described the cost-share agreement with Rockwoods School District, which runs the Outdoor Education Center at Babler, a modern, state-of-the-art, barrier-free center developed especially to serve the needs of those with physical or mental disabilities that might otherwise bar them from fully experiencing the pleasures of a Missouri state park. Stith also told of the partnership with Lowe's, who volunteered supplies and labor to refurbish structures in the park and had such a great time that they plan to come back to do more.

Leaving Babler, the group proceeded to Glencoe, just west of Castlewood State Park, where they walked a mile or two on the Al Foster Trail in the new Rock Hollow section of Castlewood. MPA's Ron Coleman, who also directs the St. Louis Open Space Council, explained plans to interconnect all the parks and open space areas along



MPA members heard Babler State Park naturalist Hannah Rennard present a program about the park and its history at MPA's annual meeting.

that reach of the Meramec River. It was a magnificent day for a hike.

Then it was on to Route 66 State Park to see the successful reclamation of a former townsite once contaminated by dioxin and now serving as a woodland recreational resource for thousands of visitors annually, from both the nearby interstate highway as well as neighboring areas of St. Louis and Franklin Counties. MPA members had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with a current issue facing the park system – the probable condemnation of the historic bridge over the Meramec River that connects the two areas of Route 66 State Park and provides connectivity for the whole Meramec Greenway concept. There was an interesting discussion with natural resource manager Don Fink and other park division staff of costs and feasibility with regard to the future of the bridge.

After a pleasant afternoon exploring the parks, the group returned to the Babler Visitor Center for an evening reception, followed by a

catered banquet. DNR Director Mark Templeton joined the group for what he styled "a conversation among friends," dealing largely with the relationship of state parks to the larger DNR mission. The gist of his presentation was to reiterate the commitment of both himself and Gov. Jay Nixon to bettering our state parks and Missouri's environment, the goal being to leave both in better shape than they found it. There was spirited discussion about the need to get more kids out of doors and into the parks, and of course about the problem of park funding.

On Sunday morning, the annual members' meeting was held, with election of two new board members, Cheryl Dillard of Kansas City and Steve Mahfood, former director of DNR. Ms. Dillard related a long-time interest in outdoor activities and state parks, especially their role in promoting public health through outdoor recreation. Immediately following the member's meeting, the board held its fall meeting, with all in attendance invited to take part.

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Most of the discussion dealt with the state parks funding crisis, but new officers were also elected: Susan Flader, president; Steve Nagel, vice-president; Eleanor Hoefle, treasurer; and B. H. Rucker, secretary.

The meeting ended at noon, with everyone agreeing it had been a successful event. One member was overheard to say, "We have such a good time at the annual meeting, I only wish more of the members would come and enjoy it." Good advice! Next year's annual meeting will be in the Kansas City area on the weekend of October 23 – mark your calendars now.

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experience in nature. Most of the participants are from urban areas and have never even visited a state park. I was helping a single mom and her young son set up their first tent. Neither had ever been camping before. That night they took part in an astronomy program and made s'mores for the first time. They were both so excited to be experiencing these activities together. It made me realize that not everyone has been as fortunate as I have been to be exposed to the outdoors all of my life. It was a joy and an honor to help them experience what truly are the wonders of the outdoor world.

Layoffs By The Numbers

Two hundred park system employees received letters October 16 that their positions were being eliminated or reduced in hours or that they were subject to "bumping" under state merit system rules by someone whose position was being eliminated. They were told which positions they might in turn be eligible to request—by October 26—if they were willing to "bump" a colleague (i.e., accept a "transfer or demotion in lieu of lay-off") and to relocate by November 16, in some cases clear across the state or to a remote area, with or without their families. In an agency with relatively low-paid but distinctly specialized positions scattered in more than eighty locations through-

out the state it was a dramatic illustration of the inadequacy of Missouri's arcane merit system.

In the end, 51 employees throughout the system were laid off, 10 retired, and 67 others were relocated, demoted, or cut to three-quarter or less time—for a total of 130 individuals and 145 positions affected, 121.2 FTE positions eliminated, and a cost savings of \$3.1 million this fiscal year and \$6.3 million in FY11. The total number of actual layoffs was less than feared, because 68 positions were already being held vacant, of which 42 were among those eliminated. But in truth, every unit and every employee within the sys-

tem was affected in some way, with untold consequences for the longer term.

No one could remember a layoff of similar magnitude and abruptness ever before in the park system or in any state agency—not even in the early 1980s when the park budget was reduced to only half what it had been in 1979. In the wake of the terminations, most parks went on reduced hours and certain facilities were closed, at least for the winter, but without any general public announcement.



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