

2019 Legislative session

Greater public investment needed in 2019-21 to ensure healthy, sustainable park system

Parks contribute to our quality of life. Parks are places where we pursue mental and physical health. They provide opportunities for our children to learn and grow and for all of us to connect with our cultures and history. Parks are the backbone of our state's tourism landscape, and they contribute significantly to state and local economies. Washington has one of the largest, most diverse and beautiful state park systems in the country — a park system to be proud of.

The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission's 2019-21 **operating request** focuses on increasing public tax support to provide a healthy, sustainable park system. The agency's capital request complements the operating request to care for existing facilities and develop new recreational and cultural opportunities that help meet demands on the park system from a rapidly growing state.

The proposals build upon the success and recovery the agency has made in the years since the Great Recession. We maintained access to parks despite dramatic tax support reductions that significantly reduced services by undermining the condition of parks and facilities, as well as the agency's ability to staff them appropriately.



Washington State Parks' 2019-21 budget request focuses directly on services that benefit visitors.

To replace general tax support, the Legislature created the Discover Pass, anticipating that earned revenue could fully support the system. While user fees are supporting the majority of park operations, earned revenue will not sufficiently replace previous tax support.

Time to invest: General taxes, not fee increase

State Parks has made the most of its financial resources, using smart staffing strategies and modern business approaches while working to fully understand and address customer and facility needs. These actions and the 2019-21 budget requests are intended to achieve longer-term success without raising the cost of the Discover Pass and relying only on targeted camping fee increases.

The Commission's 2019-21 Request recognizes that a greater public investment is needed to care for a vibrant park system. The request includes \$55.6 million in General Fund over the two years of the budget cycle. Based on a recent economic analysis, spending by park visitors generates \$64



million a year directly to the General Fund, and much of this spending occurs in rural communities in need of economic support

Highlights of the Commission's budget request

- Replaces \$10 million in public tax support as ongoing funding for greater stability, instead of the uncertainty caused by one-time appropriations over the past decade.
- Adds additional park staff, including rangers, park aides, construction and maintenance personnel and interpretive staff to increase custodial care and meet visitor expectations. Staffing remains at 2007 levels; meanwhile, increased visits place wear and tear on aging facilities, and customers who pay use fees have higher expectations for service.
- Upgrades technology, connecting parks with state systems.
- Provides funding to ensure youth and communities are receiving park system benefits and to increase educational, interpretive and service learning programs.
- Enhances promotion and marketing to generate tourism, educate people about recreation opportunities and increase revenue earnings.

Budget proposal keeps pace with increased demand

Washington's population is growing by 88,000 people a year, a trend reflected in increased park visits — 35 million visits in FY 2016 and 36.7 million visits in FY 2018. To keep pace with growing attendance and demands on the park system, State Parks must step up service capacity and address greater wear and tear on parks and buildings, provide new and upgraded systems and facilities and enhance programs to address the needs of younger, more diverse visitors. It's a modest investment that will make a meaningful difference for park visitors and the people of our state.

Other facts to consider:

- Earned revenue from agency efforts is projected to increase by 7.4 percent in 2019-21 over current levels (a 25 percent increase from 2013-15). These kinds of returns are only possible if visitors continue to see value for their money and continue choosing state parks as the premier places in the state to recreate.
- In 2017-18 customer surveys, 83 percent said their visit was worth what they spent. However, those surveyed also noted areas needing improvement: better-functioning, cleaner restrooms and facilities and greater staff presence and interaction. These are the primary areas of focus in the 2019-21 State Parks request.
- A 2015 Earth Economics study showed that 35 million state park visits (FY 2016) resulted in an overall annual economic contribution of \$1.4 billion to the state, supported 14,000 jobs, and generated \$64 million directly to the state General Fund.

State Parks' 2019-21 operating request is a sound investment in a healthy Washington.

Note: Governor Inslee's \$187 million Parks budget for 2019-21 funds many of the priorities identified in the Commission's request. While the Governor's budget does not fully fund the Commission's request, it adds stability with \$10 million in ongoing rather than one-time tax support and increases front-line park staff.