

Lawmakers consider privatizing Mississippi's dilapidated, underfunded state parks

Mississippi Today

Lawmakers are trying to figure out how to revive Mississippi's state parks, which have suffered from years of budget cuts and neglected maintenance.

But the price tag to bring the state's 25 parks (three of which are run by local governments) up to snuff is an estimated \$147 million. Plus, millions more a year would be needed to keep them up — prompting discussion of privatization and a search for other options, with a tax to fund parks likely a nonstarter in the Legislature.

State parks spending has been cut by nearly 60% since 2000, and staffing by 70%. The Mississippi Department of Wildlife Fisheries and Parks lacks manpower and money for even routine maintenance. The initial legislative budget recommendation for the coming year would cut MDWFP another \$900,000, or by about 15%.

"We are at a crossroads," said Robert Taylor, chairman of the Mississippi Commis-



A cabin at Holmes County State Park, which is 'closed until further notice' for repairs, according to the state parks website. Mississippi's parks have suffered years of underfunding and lack of maintenance. (Mississippi Department of Wildlife Fisheries and Parks)

sion of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks. "We've got to fund them to fix the crumbling infrastructure — have parks we can be proud of — or look at different things. But something has got to change."

Most of the state's 600 structures in its parks are in need of some repair — from major to minor, said Jennifer Head, parks director for MDWFP.

This comes as other states

cash in on state park tourism, with the COVID-19 pandemic driving demand for RV-ing, camping and outdoor vacationing and recreation.

Mississippi receives about 1 million visitors to its parks each year. Arkansas state parks attract nearly 8.5 million visitors a year and serves as the state's largest tourism draw, generating more than \$1 billion a year for that state's economy. Alabama sees nearly 5 million visitors to its parks annually, with an economic impact of about \$375 million.

In Arkansas, parks are funded through a dedicated "conservation tax." In Alabama, parks are 90% self-funded through fees and rentals. Mississippi parks lack an adequate dedicated funding source.

Alabama privatized one of its state parks that it had closed because of budget cuts. A few states have sold park land or solicited large private developments.

"We have a jewel in the rough," Mississippi Lt. Gov. Delbert Hosemann told Mississippi Today. "But we don't have our parks up to the standards we would require for our people to use them, and further, they are not up to the standards of surrounding states which have more amenities ... We are leaving money on the table with the tourism industry, and this is part of the face of Mississippi. People come through, see a park that's run down and they can't hook their RV up, and they get the same impression about us."

"It's time for us to take a clear, long look at this," Hosemann said.

But Hosemann noted the state doesn't have an extra \$147 million on hand to make repairs.

Sen. Neil Whaley, chairman of the Senate Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks committee, held a committee hearing on the issue last week. He said lawmakers are still in fact-gathering mode and are looking at all options. This includes possible priva-

tization of parks — either having private interests take over operations or just some services — which has been a controversial subject in the state and with federal and other states' parks.

It also includes discussion of local governments, cities and counties, taking over park operations and maintenance. In some cases the local governments would be taking over parks and land they ceded to the state many years ago.

But Whaley said lawmakers must first research legal issues with any privatization, with many parks built years ago by the Civilian Conservation Corps or purchased with federal money that could cause legal entanglement.

"This is all theoretical — we don't even have a plan yet," Whaley said.

Privatization of parks has drawn fierce debate nationwide and in Mississippi. Opponents fear private developers would "cherry pick" the best state parks that could turn profits leaving others neglected, or that privatization would turn parks into expensive resorts and limit public access.

"Absolutely, there is concern that if they're privatized, are people going to be able to afford to get in there if they start putting high-end developments like hotels and condos?" said Louie Miller, director of the Sierra Club of Mississippi. "Where would that leave the average Mississippian who wants to vacation for a week in a state park with their family? There's not a lot of public lands in Mississippi, and this was an investment by the taxpayers in state parks through the years ... I'm not saying there's no room for public-private partnership ... but privatizing just for someone else's gain needs to be looked at in the hard light of day."

Hosemann, Whaley and others say whatever is done

with state parks, lawmakers will preserve their affordability and accessibility for citizens.

"These parks belong to the people of the state of Mississippi, and I'm for finding solutions that perpetuate that," said House Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Chairman Rep. Bill Kinkade. "... I think we all advocate that we need new, creative ways to fund our parks system, and some form of privatization is inevitable — but not wholesale privatization."

Kinkade said bike, kayak and other rentals, for instance, could be privately operated. The state park system is already signed on with a national reservations systems for cabins.

One major expense for

Mississippi parks is that MDWFP is responsible for all utilities — roads, electrical services, water and sewerage — inside parks. There has been some discussion of asking power companies, co-ops and other entities to help with this infrastructure.

Hosemann said that, as former secretary of state, he has a record of championing public lands as he led the state's acquisition of Cat Island off the Coast and thousands of acres statewide. He said he would oppose any privatization that restricted public access to parks or raised prices drastically.

"Enlarging and improving our public spaces has been a goal of mine, and I intend to pursue it further," Hosemann said.

USDA now accepting applications for easement program

Press Release

The United States Department of Agricultural Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) is now accepting applications for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). The initial deadline to be considered for fiscal year 2021 funding will be January 15, 2021.

This program consists of two components: The Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) option and the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) option. The ALE assists conservation organizations in preventing the conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses and maximizes the protection of land devoted to food production. The WRE option restores, protects, and enhances enrolled wetlands and improves wildlife habitat. Eligible WRE lands include farmed or prior-converted wetlands that can be successfully and

cost-effectively restored.

"It is imperative we educate and promote ACEP to the landowners of Mississippi. We are proud to provide this service throughout the state," said State Conservationist, Kurt Readus. "We invite any interested applicant to visit with us to learn more about the easement programs that we at USDA-NRCS can offer."

Landowners interested in an ALE should contact local land trusts to develop partnerships for land easements. Applications will be accepted from eligible entities for potential ALE projects.

Landowners interested in WRE should apply at their local field office.

Applications are accepted year-round accepted and can be obtained anytime at your local field office or available online at www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted. The initial application deadline for consideration in fiscal year 2021 is January 15, 2021.

Mississippi man credited with saving woman from burning home

Associated Press

A Mississippi woman is crediting a 19-year-old man for helping save her life when her house was on fire.

Kalob Adair was taking a drive after midnight Dec. 21 when he saw smoke and fire coming from the house in his hometown of New Albany, the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal reported.

Adair called 911 to report the fire. He saw a car parked at the house and realized someone might be asleep inside the building. He went to the door of the house and started yelling and making noise to see if anyone would wake up.

"I'm pretty sure any nor-

mal person would do the same thing I did," Adair said.

Adair said the police and firefighters deserve all the recognition. But the woman who was inside the burning home called Adair a "hero."

"You literally saved my life," Melanie Holland told Adair. "God put you into a position to save my life, so I am very grateful."

Adair said he just happened there at the right time. He had been up late working on his computer at home. He decided to take a break and go for a drive.

"I didn't do anything spectacular," Adair said. "It's all God, honestly."

Holland said she would be dead if Adair had not re-

ported the fire. She said her smoke alarms were not going off because the fire was in the attic and the smoke was rising.

"I would have died in that house," she said. "I am eternally grateful."

New Albany Fire Chief Mark Whiteside also praised Adair. Quickly reporting the fire prevented further damage to the house and probably saved Holland, Whiteside said.

Firefighters arrived within three minutes. Police arrived before that, beat on the door and got Holland out of the house, Whiteside said. He said it appears the fire was caused by an electrical issue in the attic.

Don't Forget 4-H Shows Coming Soon!!

All 4-H Supplies on Hand & in Demand at Lexington Farm Supply

Wood Shavings & Hay
Vitamin & Electrolyte Soluble Powders
Stall Accessories
Brushes, Oils & Grooming Supplies
Socks & Boots, Youth Gloves
New shipment of Georgia Boots

LEXINGTON FARM SUPPLY

Store Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Sat. 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
Highway 12 East 834-3388 Lexington

CASH PLUS TITLE PLUS

205 Tchula St., Lexington, MS (across from Double Quick)
662-834-9045

Payday Loans up to \$400.00
Title Loans up to \$2,500.00

WE DO 30 DAY LOANS!!! NO Credit Check

Refer a friend, earn a free \$20.00!