

# Privatize Mississippi state parks or fund them? House, Senate at odds

## Mississippi Today

Legislative leaders appear to agree that Mississippi's long-neglected state parks need help, but while the Senate is pushing for privatization and turning parks over to local governments, the House wants to find a permanent stream of public funding.

"What that tells me is that the House and Senate agree it's an issue," said Lt. Gov. Delbert Hosemann, who oversees the Senate and said fixing the Mississippi's dilapidated state parks is a priority. "We'll all get together on this."

Mississippi's state parks have suffered from years of neglected maintenance and budget cuts to the Mississippi Department of Wildlife Fisheries and Parks. 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.

Senate Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Chairman Neil Whaley, R-Potts Camp, with Hosemann's backing has authored Senate Bill 2486 that would leave only four state parks under MD-WFP management: Holmes County, Leroy Percy, LeFleur's Bluff and Shepard. Others would be leased to private entities, turned over to counties or cities or converted to wildlife conservation areas.

Hosemann said many parks could benefit from "an infusion of knowledge and capital" from privatization.

But 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.

House Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Chairman Bill Kinkade's committee has moved forward two measures. One, House Bill 152, would divert \$3.5 million a year in state lottery money to a "deferred maintenance" plan for parks. Another, House Bill 1231, would divert about a million a year in sales taxes collected at sporting goods stores to a new "Mississippi Outdoor



**Brian Knox prepares to launch a boat onto Lake Tangipahoa at Percy Quinn State Park outside of McComb, Miss., on Monday, April 20, 2020, the first day state lakes in Mississippi reopened to fishing after weeks of being closed out of concerns of the coronavirus pandemic.** (Matt Williamson/Enterprise-Journal via AP)

Stewardship Trust Fund," with the fund capped at \$20 million. Kinkade said other measures, such as bond or borrowing bills for parks, will likely be considered this year.

Kinkade said he is trying to provide dedicated sources of funding for parks maintenance and to match federal funds as many other states do. He said the Senate plan appears "short sighted."

"All (the Senate) is giving is a partial privatization plan," Kinkade said. "That's not a long-term strategic plan. I don't want to send bad smoke signals about us not looking at their proposal, but I am concerned about it being a short-sighted plan. These state parks belong to the people of this state ... It's an issue of conservation of our natural resources."

The lottery parks bill, authored by Rep. Becky Currie, R-Brookhaven, originally called for diverting 10% of lottery proceeds to parks, but Kinkade said that is being pared down to \$3.5 million.

Current law dedicates up to \$80 million a year in state lottery proceeds to road and bridge funding, with any additional going to an education fund. The lottery hasn't operated for a full fiscal year yet, but for its first eight months the state netted more than \$70 million and has recently been averaging about \$10 million a week.

Kinkade said he has met with House education, appropriations and transportation leaders and they've approved of the parks diversion of lottery money. He noted that state parks include about 85 miles of

roads and bridges — a large part of the maintenance cost that would be in line with the intent of the lottery law to fund infrastructure.

Kinkade said Mississippi parks need a dedicated source of money for main-

tenance and improvements.

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.

a move to "dismantle our park system."

"It's an absolute step in the wrong direction," Miller said. "We won't recognize our state park system if this passes."

Mississippi receives about 1 million visitors to its parks each year. Arkansas state parks attract nearly 8.5 million visitors a year and serve 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.

Kinkade said Georgia has a trust fund for parks similar to the one being proposed here.

Louie Miller, director of the Sierra Club of Mississippi, blasted the Senate parks privatization proposal as "draconian," and

Miller said the legal definition of public trust doctrine — for things such as public parks — is that they are preserved for public use and that the government owns, protects and maintains them.

Miller said the House move to find permanent funding for parks "is a step in the right direction."

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. On Thursday he said that he supports the current Senate proposal to have some privatization of park operations, but that he would oppose selling any park lands to private entities.

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