Ohio residents are privileged to have a vast system of parks at the local, state and national levels. From the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, to the shores of Lake Erie, from the trails and sites at Hocking Hills, to the ever-developing bike trails in Franklin County, Ohioans take advantage of the numerous opportunities to get outdoors and enjoy the natural treasures that the state has to offer. Ohio is one of the few states in the nation that does not impose fees for visitors to its state parks. However, the park systems in Ohio do provide a crucial economic element in the state’s well being in terms of jobs and financial impact. Unfortunately, budgets at all levels of government are being challenged and monies set aside for Parks and Recreation departments are being reduced, causing jobs to be lost, benefits of park usage to be reduced, and deterioration of facilities. A recent study has determined that an extra $26.5 million is needed each year to properly operate the state parks and other divisions under the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, and an additional $29.9 million annually is needed to eliminate the maintenance backlog over the next 10 to 20 years.¹ This does not take into account the funding needed for metro parks and city recreation and parks departments.

Background

On the national level, Ohio is the home to one national park - the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which preserves 33,000 acres along 22 miles of the Cuyahoga River between Cleveland and Akron in northeastern Ohio. There are also national historic parks in Dayton and Chillicothe, national historic sites in Canton, Mentor and Cincinnati, and National Memorials in Cleveland Heights and Put-in-Bay. Ohio is also part of a national scenic trail.²

Ohio has the third most visited state park system in the United States with over 50 million annual visits. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) owns or manages more than 74 state parks, 20 state forests, 132 nature preserves, and 714,235 acres of land. In addition, the department has jurisdiction over 14 designated state scenic rivers, more than 7,000 miles of streams, 120,000 acres of inland waters, and parts of the Ohio River and Lake Erie.¹ ODNR employed more than 2,400 permanent and seasonal staff for fiscal year 2009. This represents only two-thirds of the total number of employees in 1992.³

In addition to the natural assets, the infrastructure in the state park system includes more than 10,000 campsites in 57 campgrounds, 80 public beaches, 188 boat ramps, 36 nature/visitor centers, nine lodges, 518 cottages, six golf courses, plus more than 390 trails totaling nearly
1,200 miles. From an administrative perspective, the park systems include buildings, roads, sewer and water systems, vehicles, and equipment.

The ODNR Division of Parks and Recreation (DPR) receives more than half of its budget from the General Revenue Fund (GRF). Approximately 41% is received from camping and rental fees and retail charges and additional money is received from the Water Safety Fund and other miscellaneous revenue funds.

On the local level, residents of Ohio are able to enjoy parks and recreation systems both in urban and rural communities. Metro Park Districts are located in the major cities of Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Akron, Toledo and Dayton, as well as other locations in Ohio. Municipalities and townships also have recreation and parks departments that provide trails, community pools, recreation centers, and programs to better serve their constituents. Many of these departments rely on levies, local government funds, and grants to properly maintain and operate their services and facilities.

Almost all metro park districts rely on levies, typically in the form of real estate taxes, as their main source of income to properly maintain and operate their services and facilities. An example of income sources for a metro park system is that of the Franklin County Metro Parks, which has more than 6 million annual visits to its parks. Its revenue comes from real estate taxes (54%), local government funds (20%), grants (12%), earned income (8%), government partnerships (4%), and other sources (2%).

All of these park systems not only provide citizens with a better quality of life, they are also crucial to the economic health of the state and local economies through the amount of related spending in areas such as gas, hotels, bed and breakfasts, cottages, private campgrounds, recreation supplies, food, museums, ski resorts, golf courses, canoe liveries, and other areas. According to a 2004 Ohio State University study, people visiting the Ohio’s state parks alone contribute an estimated $1.1 billion to the state’s economy annually.

Ohio Parks and Recreation Facts and Issues

The infrastructure required to effectively operate the park systems and departments throughout Ohio is deteriorating and in need of replacement or rehabilitation. There is also a constant expectation by the public for the expansion or addition of new facilities as metropolitan areas are expanding into previously rural areas. The DPR is experiencing an annual increase in the number of backlogged and deferred capital maintenance projects. An ODNR committee report estimated that it would cost $556 million to eliminate this backlog. Costs will continue to rise due to an underfunding trend, increases in construction costs for both labor and materials, and changes in environmental and public safety regulations.

Many DPR water and wastewater treatment systems have exceeded their useful lifespan and are in need of replacement. Many of these systems, constructed in the 1970’s, cannot meet the current demands of their users. In 2008, the ODNR Division of Engineering estimated that more than $32 million would be needed to address only those water and wastewater treatment systems that are currently in violation of Ohio EPA water quality standards, are in danger of imminent failure, or have experienced such increases in demand that they are in desperate need of renovation or replacement.
DPR owns 38 registered underground storage tanks and 113 aboveground storage tanks. There are 22 underground storage tank systems, included in the 38 registered tanks, that are in service statewide in Ohio’s state park system. 19 of these systems support retail sales of fuel at state park marinas.¹

Constant changes in storage tank regulations have made it difficult for the department to remain compliant. Only $500,000 is earmarked annually for underground storage tank repair, removal and replacement.¹ In 2007, DPR removed and did not replace 20 aboveground tanks that were no longer compliant. The parks where these tanks were located have sought alternate means for providing fuel to mowers and rolling stock.¹

These same needs are also being felt at the local levels as well. Facilities at many urban recreation centers are past their expected service life and are in need of repairs or risk being closed for health and safety reasons. Health and social services are also a big part of local parks and recreation departments. There is a growing need for green initiatives through the use of more bike trails to promote less reliance on motor vehicles to get to work and other activities. The existing trails and services, with more usage, need maintenance at higher levels to remain ahead of and to extend expected service life.

As stated above, the facilities owned and operated by parks and recreation departments are important for the local and state economy in Ohio. The tourism industry in Ohio relies on parks to provide demand for lodging, sporting goods sales, recreational vehicle and watercraft sales, dock rentals, food services, hunting and fishing equipment and licenses, and other areas.

According to a 2002 Ohio Poll conducted by the University of Cincinnati, 83% of all Ohioans have visited a state park at least once in their lifetime. According to a 2004 OSU study, 42% of all households visited a state park at least once in 2004.¹

Ohio is one of a few states that does not charge a fee for park visitors. An ODNR proposal to charge modest fees to provide revenues for one of the nation’s finest state park systems was met with public outcry to not implement fees.⁵

DPR has been subjected to over $17.5 million in GRF reductions since 2000.

The average age of vehicles in the DPR fleet is 10 years with an average of over 100,000 miles per vehicle.

32 state parks have no on-site manager and 22 state parks have no permanent staff, however there has been a significant increase in day and overnight visits. Since 1990, DPR reduced its permanent staff from 800 to 458 positions. DPR park officers are at times the only staff personnel in the park and at times provide functional oversight for seasonal staff working at overnight facilities in the evening. Polls, surveys and written and verbal complaints have indicated that visitors feel less safe because of the reduction in park officer coverage in the parks.

Parks such as Buckeye Lake, Cleveland Lakefront, East Fork, Indian Lake, Van Buren and, Hueston Woods all have maintenance needs.³
An example of reduced services is at Caesar Creek State Park in Warren County. A picnic area, restrooms, and drinking fountains have been removed, a concession stand has been closed due to no staff, and a changing house for the beach was razed due to its deterioration.\(^5\)

Ohio ranked second among states for the percentage of beach-water samples, 18%, that exceeded health standards for bacteria, based on 1,350 samples taken from Lake Erie in 2007.\(^6\)

Approximately 2 million people visited nine state-operated beaches on Lake Erie in 2007.\(^6\)

The City of Cleveland Department of Parks, Recreation and Properties is estimated to employ 511 full time and 842 part time personnel in 2009.\(^7\) The City of Columbus Recreation and Parks Department is expected to employ 269 full time and 1,483 part time personnel in 2009.\(^8\) This shows the importance that recreation and parks departments have on the work force.

A proposal by Toledo City Council would eliminate $450,000 in funding for city-sponsored recreational activities and facilities, like baseball tournaments and the Ottawa Park Ice Rink.\(^9\)

80% of the Toledo Metroparks budget is generated through tax revenue. Shrinking home prices mean lower revenue for parks. A recent survey stated that 90% of those who live in Lucas County visit the parks.\(^10\)

The City of Columbus Recreation and Parks Department had planned to close 12 recreation facilities, three specialized facilities, reduce personnel levels in both parks and building maintenance by over $500,000, and discontinue the “Music in the Air” program which would eliminate the Jazz and Rib and Latino festivals in 2009.\(^8\) However, by shifting $618,000 in bed-tax money, the city will help reopen five of the previously closed facilities. In addition, financial assistance from outside groups saved the city’s two downtown main summer events, the Jazz and Rib and Latino festivals.\(^11\)

Franklin County Metroparks placed a 0.75-mill levy initiative on the May 5, 2009 ballot. The plan focuses on maintaining the existing park system. A renewal of the previously expired levy was determined to be insufficient to support future needs and demands.\(^4\) Fortunately, this issue passed with 58% of the vote in favor, which will help support the Metroparks of Franklin County for the next ten years.

The national average for park-related total expenditures, which does not include expenses for stadiums, zoos, museums, and aquariums, per resident, is $91 as of FY2006. In Ohio, Cleveland ($88), Columbus ($78) and Toledo ($40) were below average, while Cincinnati ($140) was above average.\(^12\)

In a national comparison of total parkland per 1,000 residents for cities of similar population densities, Cleveland and Toledo were below average, while Columbus and Cincinnati were slightly above average.\(^12\)

**Policy options**

Ohio’s parks and recreation systems have long been considered some of the finest in the country. Unfortunately, funding for these programs, primarily from state general funds and real estate levies, is being reduced due to the effects of the economic downturn that is lowering home values and causing a reduction in sales tax receipts. Ohio’s state legislators and local
government officials must look for ways to maintain our existing facilities and to meet the increased demand for expanding these parks.

Specific ASCE Ohio Council Recommendations

- Ohio Legislators need to consider a proposal for usage fees for its state parks
- Consider a statewide Real Estate Transfer Fee to be dedicated to the state park systems
- Encourage local government agencies to maintain or increase spending for their recreation and parks departments and stress that local festivals and recreation centers create a healthier and happier community
- Urge Ohio’s congressional delegation to support fully funding federal programs that benefit the capital needs of Ohio’s state parks and recreational areas, such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund
- With the economic benefits provided by the state park system, legislators need to realize that most recreation and parks budgets are just a small fraction of the overall budget, however, they should not always be the first areas examined for cuts and reductions

Sources

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