

Testimony on 2019 Senate Bill 212

Senator Robert Cowles

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy – May 30, 2019

Thank you, committee members, for allowing me to testify on 2019 Senate Bill 212. This bill requires the Department of Natural Resources to waive the fee for an annual vehicle admission sticker to the Wisconsin State Parks System issued to the parent or guardian of a Wisconsin student enrolled in fourth grade.

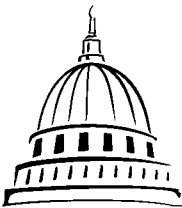
The Wisconsin State Park System consists of dozens of State Parks, Forests, Recreational Areas, and Trails, and represents the best of Wisconsin's pristine natural resources, abundance of wildlife, and prime recreational opportunities. Wisconsin has a strong history of land and water stewardship and outdoor recreation, becoming the first state to have a state park in 1878 when it formed The State Park in Vilas County. To date, our State Parks are visited by over 17 million people annually, but as the next generation increasingly spends more time indoors and less time outdoors, we need to focus on maintaining strong support for these natural treasures.

Senate Bill 212 waives the fee for an annual vehicle admission sticker to the Wisconsin State Parks System issued to the parent or guardian of a public or private school student enrolled in fourth grade. As students start their civic education, this bill would provide these students and their caretakers with the incentive they need to get outside and experience some of our best public lands while spending time with family and building a lifelong respect for our natural resources. This annual sticker, normally \$28 for vehicles with Wisconsin plates, admits anyone inside the vehicle to State Parks and Forests.

Under Senate Bill 212, the parent or guardian may only receive one waiver in his or her lifetime, and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) may issue a waiver only once per household. Further, the waived fee for the annual State Parks Sticker would only be issued if evidence is produced that their child is in fourth grade on January 1st of the issued pass's year. Finally, Senate Bill 212 requires the DNR to provide an activity guide on its website for school-aged children related to State Parks, Forests, Recreational Areas, and Trails to further introduce youth to our state's natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities.

This bill mirrors the federal Every Kid in a Park program, and also reflects other statewide initiatives to get more kids outdoors. Kids are spending more time in front of screens and less time outdoors, contributing to a less physically and mentally healthy lifestyle and creating bad habits for the future. Senate Bill 212 serves as a commitment to our state's youth by helping our state to engage with the next generation of State Park visitors and supporters while encouraging a healthier lifestyle for young Wisconsinites.

Through passing this bill, we would not only help these students and their families to engage more with each other and with Wisconsin's great outdoors, but the state will have a stronger foundation in our conservation and outdoor recreation legacy to carry on these important traditions into the next generation and beyond.



STATE REPRESENTATIVE
MELISSA SARGENT

WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY

48th DISTRICT

May 30, 2019

Thank you to the Chair and members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy for allowing me to testify in support of SB-212 before you today. This bill provides an opportunity for 4th-grade students, as they learn about the state of Wisconsin in the classroom, to experience our state parks with their families.

By making available free vehicle admission stickers for the families of 4th-grade students SB-212 allows families to experience and enjoy the 66 state parks of Wisconsin, along with state forests and other state recreational areas, while ensuring that future generations will maintain and continue to use these spaces for years to come. Wisconsin has a rich history of conservation and outdoor heritage, and our state's natural resources and environmental treasures are a cornerstone to our state's identity. The well-being of Wisconsin's natural resources relies on the education of our state's youth, and this bill proves to be a fantastic opportunity for students to experience the state's breathtaking landscapes and green spaces.

As it is the State Legislature's responsibility to create and preserve state parks and natural areas, we must also ensure that their legacy carries on into the future. By bringing our kids into our state parks we are planting seeds that will continue on the legacy of our public lands by teaching future generations how to preserve, conserve, and enjoy all that our shared resources have to offer. I know firsthand the impact that visiting our parks can have on our youth. I have seen the wonder in my own children's eyes as they experience the majesty of the outdoors, and have seen my family at their happiest as we are together in the beautiful open spaces that Wisconsin is home to. I want each and every child in Wisconsin to have the same opportunities for these experiences – I can't think of a better way to help teach our students and our future leaders about how their government can have a positive impact on them and their love for the great outdoors.

Not only does this legislation provide an opportunity for children and families to experience and appreciate Wisconsin's state parks and instill education and awareness for future generations, but it is also key in creating economic stimulus and potential for our state. Families across Wisconsin are planning adventurous trips around the country when, in fact, there are so many great opportunities and adventure right here in our state. Being able to keep these families in Wisconsin, enjoying our state parks and natural areas and seeing what we have to offer in our own great state, is vital for our economy with people buying gas, spending money in local restaurants near the parks, camping, staying in hotels, visiting Main Street, and more. Additionally, allowing families to experience the great benefits of our state parks when their child is in 4th grade opens the door for further revenue from state parks admission passes for years to come.

SB-212 introduces kids to outdoor recreation through creating accessibility and awareness of our state's natural treasures, while also providing economic benefits to our state and ensuring that future generations will carry on the legacy of our state parks for generations to come. I am proud to co-author this bipartisan legislation, and I thank you for your consideration.



Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

2019 Senate Bill 212

Fee Waivers for State Park Vehicle Receipts to Pupils Enrolled in Grade 4 May 30, 2019

Good afternoon Chairman Cowles and members of the Committee. My name is Ben Bergey, and I am the Director of the Wisconsin State Parks and Recreation Program with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 212, which deals with fee waivers for state park vehicle admission receipts to students enrolled in 4th grade.

The Wisconsin State Park System sees more than 17.5 million visitors across more than 100 properties statewide. These visitors engage in a variety of recreational opportunities from camping and hiking to boating and picnicking. But a visit to a state park is more than a picnic or a camping trip; a visit to a state park is an opportunity for families to unite, learn about and enjoy Wisconsin's great outdoors, and most important, build traditions that create lifelong memories. The Wisconsin State Park System has a history of working with youth to provide opportunities to experience the outdoors. Most recently, the program is working with the Girl Scouts and 40 other states on the nation-wide initiative Girl Scouts Love State Parks. Additionally, a majority of our on-property programming and Wisconsin Explorer/Junior Ranger Program is geared toward school-aged children.

Under SB 212, the Department would be required to create a vehicle waiver system for all families with a 4th grader enrolled in public or private school on January 1 of the year for which the vehicle admission receipt is issued. In addition, the Department is to provide a visitor activity guide for state parks, forests, recreation areas, and trails on its internet site. Currently, the Wisconsin Explorer/Junior Ranger Program and the Wisconsin State Parks Visitor Guide are both available online.

Since it began in 2015, the Wisconsin State Parks Program has admired the National Parks Service's Every Kid in a Park initiative. This initiative, funded through their \$20-million youth engagement program budget, covers the entrance fees of families with 4th graders. In addition, that budget also provides transportation grants and educational materials to schools.

Should Wisconsin enact such legislation, the Department estimates a potential cost of \$254,000 annually to serve approximately 72,000 eligible 4th graders. This figure is based on estimates for the number of households with 4th graders potentially utilizing our state parks. This estimate includes loss of revenue on annual and daily admission sales and a cost to administer the program. The bill provides for a transfer from the state's general fund to offset the admission sales. Given that the Wisconsin State Parks are operationally self-funded, careful analysis of each decision affecting revenues must be considered, along with potential options.

For the past several years the Wisconsin State Park System hosts Free Fun Weekend waiving all entrance fees during the first full weekend in June. SB 212 would complement our OutWiGo program which encourages individual and community health and wellness by getting people outdoors. Our recent OutWiGo Girls event hosted at the Southern Unit of the Kettle Moraine State Forest had over 1,600 participants, including many youth.

While we support this fee waiver and the encouragement it would provide to Wisconsin youth and their families to engage at our state parks and enjoy our natural resources, we would want to look at a thoughtful approach on how to implement this program. We look forward to having a conversation with the bill's authors on how to develop this idea to ensure an efficient, cost-effective way to deliver waivers and maintain a positive customer service experience for all visitors to our state parks. To ensure this positive experience, the fulfillment of the admission sticker should occur prior to customers visiting our state parks.

On behalf of the Parks and Recreation Management Bureau and the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

To: Members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

From: Jonathan Ringdahl,
Board Member, Friends of Wisconsin State Parks

Date: May 30, 2019

RE: Testimony in Favor of SB 212 relating to: fee waivers for state park vehicle admission receipts to pupils enrolled in grade 4 and making an appropriation.

My name is Jonathan Ringdahl. I am a Friends of Wisconsin State Parks board member. I visited all 65 Wisconsin State Park system properties in 2012. My current property visits number is 70. I have a unique perspective on our state park system.

My love for our incredible Wisconsin State Parks started on a school field trip to Perrot State Park. I will never forget the feeling of awe I felt when emerging from the forest onto the Brady's Bluff summit. The Mississippi River view took my breath away. It still does.

This bill represents the chance to inspire future generations to fall in-love with our state parks. Falling in-love with them carries significant mental and physical health benefits. A nature connection in our kids' lives, with the competing influence of electronics, has never been more important.

If this bill is passed, it will open the door to new families to experience the benefits of state park visits. It can help turn them into repeat visitors once they realize how awesome our parks are. They are Wisconsin's treasures. In addition, it can add extra economic activity in our communities who are strengthened by nearby state parks.

This program mirrors the successful National Parks program Every Kid in a Park. This program can benefit Wisconsin families and I ask you to join me in support of SB 212.

You all rock!! :)
Jonathan