



EDWARD BROOKS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Testimony – Assembly Bill 254

Assembly Committee Natural Resources and Sporting Heritage

July 17, 2013

Chairman Ott, and members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in favor of Assembly Bill 254, the Veterans' Appreciation Act.

Wisconsin has a wonderful tradition of caring for our veterans who suffer injury in the line of duty, but we have not done enough to demonstrate our gratitude to all who have served. I authored the Veterans' Appreciation Act to remedy the situation, and to show our veterans – all of our veterans, that Wisconsin cares.

By allowing all of our veterans free access to our state parks and trails, we give them access to the land that they gave their time and effort to defend. AB 254 encourages veterans to recreate in-state with their families, which will expose a new generation of Wisconsinites to the beauty of the outdoors and the joys of fishing, camping, and boating.

It has been brought to my attention that a technical error made during the drafting process, and we have had a simple amendment drafted to reflect the true intentions of the bill. Legislative Counsel will give a brief explanation of the amendment following my testimony.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I will take any questions that you might have at this time.



Department of Natural Resources Testimony AB 254

Presented to:
Assembly Natural Resources and Sporting Heritage Committee
10 am, Wednesday, July 17, 2013, 417 North (GAR Hall)

Presented by:
Dan Schuller, Director, Bureau of Parks and Recreation

AB 254. Relating to: free admission to state parks and state trails for veterans.

Good Morning Chairperson Ott, Vice-Chair Kleefisch and Committee Members. I am here today to discuss AB 254, which would provide free, state park, forest and trail access to all state veterans.

I would first like to take a moment, on behalf of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, to acknowledge the contributions and sacrifices made by our nation's military personnel and thank them publicly for their service. Our agency has a distinguished history of supporting active-duty service members, reserve service members and veterans and offering both our gratitude and support for their service. The Department fully supports the goal of providing free outdoor recreation opportunities to veterans in appreciation of their service and sacrifice for their country. Understanding the desire to provide benefits to those who have served our country, we also recognize the challenges government programs face providing services, and the legislature's desire to reduce the Department's need for GPR support.

The Department of Natural Resources administers state parks, state designated trails, state recreation areas, southern state forests and northern forest properties. A state park vehicle admission sticker or trail pass is currently

required for entrance into most state parks and trails, all recreation areas, and southern forests and at the state's six northern forests.

The concept that users of Wisconsin's state parks pay to support their operations has been in place since 1961. 50% of the state park system budget was funded with general purpose revenue and 50% was funded by user fees, known as segregated revenues. Parks received the GPR support in recognition of the economic impact parks have on a statewide basis (currently estimated to be in excess of \$1 billion annually), parks contribution to the health and well-being of all Wisconsin citizens and to keep parks affordable for all users. In 1995, the statute was amended and the 50/50 funding formula was eliminated. As a result, a significant shift in funding has occurred, placing a much greater reliance on fees generated by park system users to keep the system open and operational.

With GPR support decreasing and with each fee waiver that has been implemented, Wisconsin's State Parks are constantly under pressure to deliver higher and higher levels of service and amenities without the ability to offset the loss of revenues.

Over 76% of the state park system's operating budget now comes directly from segregated fees, basically the admission and camping fees paid by paid users. The percentage of GPR funding has dropped to less than 24%.

Based upon our estimates of annual visitation, the proposed AB 254 will result in approximately \$968,300 of lost revenue annually to the Department. This potential lost revenue is almost 20% of the total GPR appropriated in FY 13 for operational support for the WSPS.

So what does that mean? We thought it would be important to provide you with some context as to what that number means to the State Park System. This amount is roughly equivalent to the seasonal staffing and operations at four of our keystone properties including: Peninsula, Devil's Lake, High Cliff, and Kohler-Andrae State Parks (\$985,400).

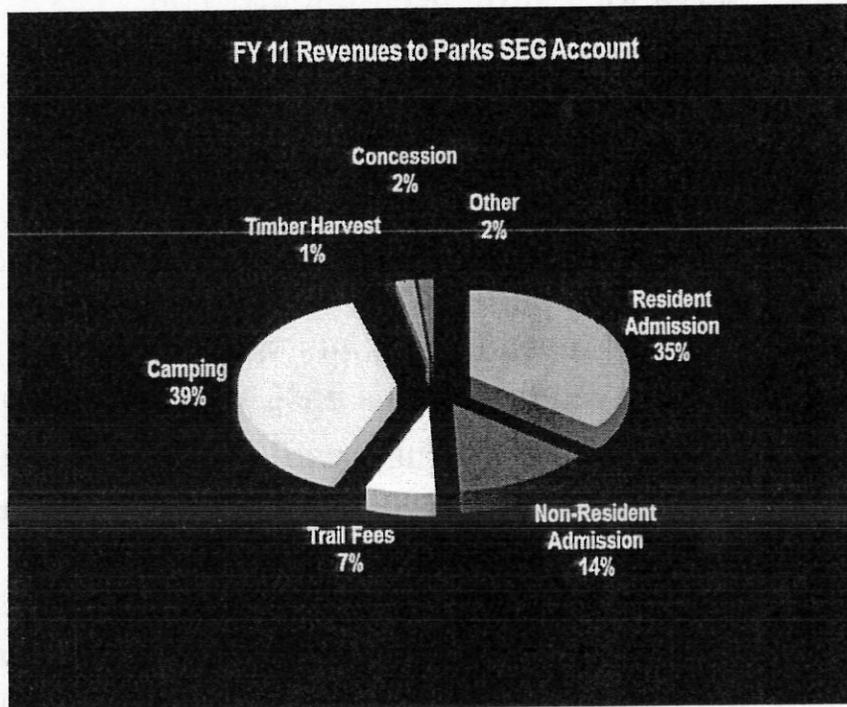
Wisconsin law extends many privileges for hunting, fishing and trapping to active members of the U.S. Armed Forces, Wisconsin National Guard or Reserves for both residents and nonresidents. Different sections of Wisconsin statutes authorize these privileges, each with their own qualifications. In fact, there is legislation on today's public hearing agenda that will give Purple Heart recipients a conservation Patron license for \$10.00

The Wisconsin State Park System has historically provided state park fee waivers to school groups, rehabilitative programs serving people with disabilities and seniors holding the discontinued Senior Citizen Recreation Card. Conservation Patron license holders are not required to purchase park stickers or trail passes because a portion of their patron license is remitted to the park and forest segregated revenue accounts. Since 2009, the Department also waives entrance fees for veterans with a 70% or greater level of disability and for former Prisoners of War by issuing a card to qualifying veterans. 2011 Act 168 reduced the disability threshold to 50% or greater disability.

2013 Act 20 (the state budget bill) includes a provision waiving entrance sticker and trail pass requirements for all resident active duty service members on the Veterans Day and Memorial Day weekends and provides a free annual entrance sticker and trail pass to all resident active duty service members on a one-time only basis. The legislature estimated that the fiscal impact on the Parks and Forestry accounts from this provision would total \$210,000 for the biennium.

Comparing state park systems in the Midwest indicates full year discount and free admission programs are not common. A web search of Michigan and Indiana State Parks found no veteran discount programs; however, Indiana does have a fee waiver for former POW's. Minnesota State Parks offers a one-time free daily entrance sticker for veterans and entrance fees are waived for veterans with a 100% disability. Illinois and Iowa State Parks charge no admission fee to any visitors. Other states, such as Missouri, offer free state park admission to everyone using a percentage of the state's sales tax as their funding mechanism.

The Parks program has grown considerably over the past ten years; however, our overall funding has remained relatively flat. We've added major new properties and facilities statewide, the operations of which were funded entirely by user fees. A sample of these projects is included in Appendix A



The WSPS has also added over 28,000 acres of land under its management during that time period.

The WSPS would be unable to absorb the estimated fiscal impact that this bill would present without an offsetting amount of GPR or by adjusting seasonal or property specific services.

I am personally grateful for the sacrifices Wisconsin's veterans made in serving our country. As Director of Wisconsin's State Parks, State Trails and Southern State Forests, it is my privilege to direct my staff who administer world-class natural resources and provide outstanding customer service to the estimated 14 million visits we receive annually.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee today. If you have any questions, I would gladly take them now.

Appendix A – Major Additions and Expansions to the WSPS, Operationally Funded Through User Fees

- New Property Acquisition and Opening
 - Straight Lake State Park
 - Menomonee River State Recreation Area
 - Governor Thompson State Park
- Campgrounds – Approximately 1,000 total campsites added over 10 years, majority added through additions or new camping opportunities at:
 - Willow River State Park
 - Harrington Beach State Park
 - Governor Thompson State Park
 - Buckhorn State Park
 - Blue Mound State Park (Bicycle Campground)
 - Council Grounds
 - Governor Dodge Group Camp
 - Kohler-Andrae Addition
 - Lake Kegonsa Addition
 - Potawatomi Group Camp
- In addition to new camping:
 - Upgraded and added new electrical service to over 600 sites
- New Facilities
 - 30+ vault toilets at various properties
 - Interpretive Center at Chippewa Moraine
 - Hausman Haus at Lapham Peak – Major educational center, MOU for use by Milwaukee Public School District
 - Toilet/Shower Buildings
 - Blue Mound
 - Richard Bong
 - Brunet Island
 - Devil’s Lake
 - Interstate
 - Copper Falls
 - Lake Kegonsa
 - Peninsula
 - Point Beach
 - PEVS
 - Blue Mound
 - Wildcat Mountain

- Council Grounds
- Willow River
- Gov. Thompson
- High Cliff
- Rib Mountain
- Lake Kegonsa
- Mirror Lake
- Point Beach
- Newport
- Rock Island – Jackson Harbor Workstation
- Trail Development – paving, surfacing and bridge repair and replacement
 - Old Abe
 - Buffalo River
 - Chippewa River Trail
 - Glacial Drumlin
 - Capital City
 - Hank Aaron
 - Elroy Sparta
 - Military Ridge
 - Red Cedar Trail