

# Officials hope proposal will help park budget

After several months of discussion, the Kansas Wildlife and Parks Commission made a few changes in the state park fees for 2005.

At a recent meeting in Atchison, the cost of the 14 day state park camping permit was raised from \$75 to \$99. The Commission also approved the creation of in-park RV storage for \$125 per month, as well as month-long campsite rental ranging from \$200 to \$320, depending on the utilities used. The fee increases will become effective Jan. 1, 2005.

Several other park entrance and camping fee changes had been discussed in previous public meetings but were not pursued at the Oct. 28 public hearing. Citing a lack of public support for the broader array of state park fee increases, the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks removed most fee increase proposals from its final recommendations to the Commission.

"This demonstrates that the Department and Commission are responsive to the wishes of constituents," said Parks Division Director Jerry Hoover. "One recurring sentiment we heard was that the entire cost of our state parks shouldn't be paid just by users because state parks provide benefits to all Kansans."

A lack of park funds is not due to declining usage in most parks. Visitation counts continue their upward trend, confirming research showing that nearly two-thirds of Kansans use

state parks. Kansas State Parks have hosted more than 7 million visits annually since 2000.

However, funding support for state parks is changing. Just a few years ago, the state general fund provided 65 percent of state park operating budgets. Today, the general fund makes up less than 15 percent and additional general fund reductions are expected as state officials and legislators seek ways to bolster budgets for education and other purposes.

There is a proposal in the making that would give the state parks a dedicated funding source. The proposed vehicle registration program that the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks is requesting for fiscal year 2006 would provide a \$5 increase in the vehicle registration fee. Of the \$5, \$1 would be put into the Local Outdoor Recreation Grant Program, and the remaining \$4 would be set aside for park operation budgets. This proposal would require the department to "give up" state general fund money and resident vehicle permits. An implementation date has not yet been decided, but the ideal date would be July 1, 2005. Anticipated exemptions are trailers, trucks over 16,000 pounds, registered farm vehicles, government vehicles, and certain commercial vehicles.

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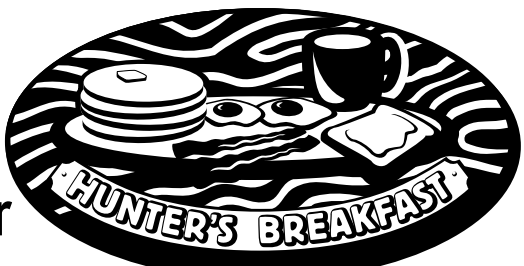
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