

Park funding at issue

County facilities OK, but state system takes \$11 million hit

By Terrance Thornton
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As city, county and state officials grapple with dwindling budgets, funding resources for public parks are coming harder and harder to find, East Valley officials say.

While Maricopa County's parks and recreation funding remains intact — no county parks are slated to close — Arizona's state park system has been faced with a more than \$11 million cut this fiscal year to dollars allocated by the Arizona Legislature, state parks officials say.

State, county and city lawmakers agree those cuts from the Arizona Legislature could force some state parks to shutter.

In the East Valley, Lost Dutchman State Park, 6109 N. Apache Trail outside of Apache Junction, is slated to close June 3, but that can be avoided if \$24,000 is generated from donations and fundraising events between now and then to keep the park open next year, state park officials say.

County vs. state

On July 1, 2009, the annual operating budget for Arizona State Parks was \$19.5 million, but following cuts, the operating budget dwindled to \$7.7 million, according to ASP spokeswoman Ellen Bilbrey.

Ms. Bilbrey says to operate an effective Arizona state park program \$30 million is needed to provide staffing for the 30 parks and the 160,000 acres of land those areas encompass.

State parks raised \$9 million through gate-fee remits in calendar year 2009, according to Ms. Bilbrey. The operating budget for Maricopa County Parks and Recreation is \$7 million for fiscal year 2009-10, according to R.J. Cardin, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation director.

Mr. Cardin says only about 10 percent of the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation operating budget comes from allocations made by the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, the other 90 percent comes from entrance fees, he pointed out.

This fiscal year, the board of supervisors allocated \$700,000 to the county park system, which Mr. Cardin says has been typical of the last three fiscal-year cycles.

The idea with all park programs in Arizona is that those facilities pay for themselves through gate-fee remits, state and county parks officials say.

But while Maricopa County parks, programs and staff have been left intact, the state park workforce has been reduced by half compared to two years ago, Ms. Bilbrey says.

“ We have so few employees now,” Ms. Bilbrey said in an April 6 phone interview of state cuts forcing a reduction of 200 employees. “It is frightening to think to keep state tourism going we need to staff state parks with just volunteers.”

Two years ago there were about 400 full-time employees operating the state park system, Ms. Bilbrey pointed out.

“All over the state there are these efforts to keep the parks open through IGAs,” she said of intergovernmental agreements done to keep state parks like Lost Dutchman open. “But you have to have rangers, all of those people that you count on to keep the experience copasetic.”

According to Ms. Bilbrey, 2.3 million people paid a gate fee to enter Arizona state parks last calendar year.

“State parks are for tourism, to move people through the state to the rural areas,” Ms. Bilbrey says of the original push in 1952 to create a state park system.

“ The climate still brings the tourism. As an economic engine the parks have done very well to bring it bigger and bigger.”

According to Ms. Bilbrey, state parks help generate \$230 million in commerce for businesses, lodging and restaurants located in the vicinity of a state park.

While state park officials often tout the large number of tourism-fueled dollars generated by their facilities, Mr. Cardin says county parks may contribute to the local economy but the real advantages it brings is to the quality of life of an area.

“ We don’t anticipate any park closures or diminished staff nor do we anticipate any decreases in service levels for our customers,” he explained in an April 6 phone interview. “However, we do not look at adding any new service levels in the near future.”

In anticipation of state cuts, Mr. Cardin says about five years ago the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department made a big push to reduce costs and truly become self-sufficient.

“From an operating standpoint I would say it is definitely self sustaining,” he said of the county park program. “ That is really the goal for all the parks in the system. In general, we want our parks to be primarily self-sustaining, but still affordable for the general public. A \$6 visit to a regional park is a good deal.”

With doom-and-gloom headlines depicting a crisis at Arizona state parks, Mr. Cardin says some folks don’t understand that county parks will remain open for the foreseeable future.

“I think the board of supervisors would like to maintain this 10 percent level,” he said of the annual budget allocation. “ We are trying to get the message out to people that county parks are not going down. We are there for the residents of the county and the visitors.”

Show me the money

While Arizona municipalities have scrambled to provide in-kind donations, hard cash and volunteer support for state parks within close proximity, the Arizona Legislature may be crafting legislation to help the cash crunch.

House Bill HCR 2040 — coined the “sustainable state parks fund” — in recent weeks was introduced, but not heard by the Arizona House Appropriations Committee.

The bill, as it was originally proposed, would have set up a system where when a motorist was required to register his or her vehicle a \$10 fee would be assessed through an opt-out clause to go toward a newly created state park fund to help pay for operating costs, according to Rep. Jon Kavanagh, R-District 8.

Rep. Kavanaugh is the Arizona House Appropriations Committee chairman and says the original bill, as proposed, was a direct violation of the Arizona Constitution, which is why he chose that the committee not hear the bill at all.

“People at the parks have been looking for funding because we have cut them; they claim they are going to close 12,” he said in an April 6 phone interview. “ This is actually happening around the country.”

Because of motorists having to check a box if they did not want to donate, Rep. Kavanagh called the bill “deceptive.”

“If you don’t want to donate, you don’t check the box — that is called an opt out, which quite frankly is very deceptive,” he explained.

In addition to Rep. Kavanagh’s deception claims of the originally proposed bill, he says shifting money from vehicle license tax remits to state parks is a direct violation of the Arizona Constitution.

“The Arizona Constitution specifically states any money for vehicle registration can go to roads and highways,” he pointed out. “That was unconstitutional; they can only use the money for park roads, which only makes up 5 percent of their total operating costs. What they wanted was unconstitutional.”

Rep. Kavanagh called the proposed bill a tax increase.

“I am not going to help them (Democrats) do that in a terrible economic period,” he said of his decision to not hear the original proposal. “For all of those reasons I refused to hear the bills.”

Following his blockade of the original bill, Rep. Kavanagh created his own bill requiring motorists to opt-in to contributing dollars to the special state park fund.

According to Rep. Kavanagh, that bill passed with a two-thirds majority vote through the House and is set to be heard on the Senate floor next week.

“All we need is \$2 million and that will keep all the parks open. With over four million vehicles, if only 200,000 do the \$10 donation, we have saved the parks,” he said. “I find it hard to believe we won’t get that money to help the parks.”

Rep. Kavanagh says that when any program is on the chopping block, typical arguments made by advocates revolve around how much money is brought in by their program, but he says those dollars are not real — they are just what they are, arguments.

“For some reason we never see this money,” he said of the claimed \$230 million economic boon for Arizona created by the existence of state parks. “Some parks make money, some parks lose money

Q&A with Steve Filipowciz, on keeping Lost Dutchman State Park open

- Where are we in negotiations with the state park officials when it comes to the city of Apache Junction helping out to keep Lost Dutchman State Park open beyond June 3?

“Apache Junction is working very closely with Arizona state parks staff on a document — could be a memo of understanding or partnership agreement — that (establishes) several areas of mutual interest and cooperation.”

- What are some of the options being discussed?

“All our energies are presently focused on keeping LDSP open and economically viable within the Arizona State Parks system, operated by state parks staff. We — both state park and city staff — believe this can be accomplished by a series of capital improvements that the state parks board authorized at their February 2010 meeting. It would likely result in curtailing some LDSP summertime operations. While approximately 38 campsites would be electrified, a new shower and restroom facility would be built and some additional day-use trailhead parking would be improved. Note that current campsites are \$15/night, electrified sites would go for \$30/night thus significantly enhancing the revenue generated at LDSP to sustain its operations.

- How can the status of Lost Dutchman State Park help or hinder economic development in Apache Junction?

“If the park does close then it is thought many visitors who come back year after year would likely go elsewhere — think New Mexico. The annual infusion of winter visitor dol-lars to our local economy would be less. Bottom line: fewer jobs, less sales tax revenue to support other city/county services.

Editor’s note: Mr. Filipowicz is the economic development director for the city of Apache Junction.

“ While I believe our city has demonstrated true leadership in responding to state parks’ call for help, our community has also risen to the challenge with local businesses like Ace Hardware, Promack Treasure Hunters and Superstition Harley-Davidson stepping up.”

— Steve Filipowicz, Apache Junction Economic Development director and some parks break even. None of the money-making parks are being closed.”

Sen. Rebecca Rios, D-District 23, says legislature cuts to state park funding is counterproductive.

“If you cut that \$6 million it will not allow the ability to raise an estimated \$230 million,” she said in an April 6 phone interview of the first round of cuts to state park funding. “This legislature knew full well the impact.”

Sen. Rios says the already approved cuts to state-park funding may end up “killing an economic engine for Arizona.”

“Once again, we are driving a stake through the heart of our parks system,” she said. “I don’t know why we are going to privatize to the detriment of the entire park system.”

Sen. Rios says she does not understand some at the legislature who believe privatization of a public park is the right way to go.

“ We have seen the results of local communities trying to keep these parks as the economic engine they are — they are trying to keep them afloat,” she said of cash-strapped municipalities. “ There was no logical reason. I think it is a situation that we really hurt ourselves in the long run.”

Sen. Rios says the big picture was not taken into consideration when the legislature approved sweeping cuts to state park funding.

“ The answer for many that supported the cuts is they think the parks should be privatized,” she noted. “ You need to look big and broad when you make cuts and they (Republicans) clearly did not do that in this situation.”

Lost Dutchman State Park

According to state park officials, initial suggestions suggested Lost Dutchman costs about \$280,000 annually to operate, but gets back in entrance fees about \$260,000, creating a net cost potentially for the city of Apache Junction of \$20,000 annually.

Apache Junction community leaders say they want to keep Lost Dutchman open and in an effort to do that have created a Friends of Lost Dutchman State Park, a chapter of the Arizona State Parks Foundation, to take donations.

According to Apache Junction Mayor John Insalaco the chapter has collected \$13,000 of the \$24,000 goal.

In addition to the donation-taking chapter, the city of Apache Junction has provided materials, patrols by police officers and community donations made possible by local business

The memorandum of understanding

1. Cooperate on matters of physical security and park policing through periodic patrols as a crime deterrent, when operational considerations so permit.
2. Coordinate closely for mutual cooperation on special park and community events.
3. Reduce park operating expenses through potential sharing of equipment, operators, transfer of surplus equipment, and assignment of community service workers to assist in maintenance projects at the park.

4. Cross-market the park on city's Web site, utilize city grants writing staff to procure grants for the park, and identify other areas of mutual interest to foster and strengthen the critical relationship between the parties.

owners, Mayor Insalaco says.

Lost Dutchman Source: City of Apache Junction is an economic boon for Apache Junction, because it is believed that some of the 200,000 patrons who annually visit the park often spend dollars on lodging and meals, city officials say.

Mayor Insalaco says keeping Lost Dutchman State Park open is a priority for not only the municipality, but also the community of Apache Junction.

“ You know they started the foundation and put a chapter here,” he said in an April 6 phone interview. “ They have meetings every week to try and see what they can do to raise money.”

Mayor Insalaco says the 8 a.m. April 24 Lost Dutchman State Park Run could take in a big chunk of change.

The fundraising motorcycle run cost \$15 and is sponsored by Superstition Harley-Davidson, 2910 W.

Apache Trail, according to an event flier.

“ When state parks (officials) were out here Apache Junction was the first one to pitch in and help,” Mayor Insalaco says and was confirmed by state park officials. “ If they can get a thousand riders then we are home free.”

To learn more about the event call 480-346-0600 or go to www.superstitionhd.com.

Mayor Insalaco says keeping Lost Dutchman State Park open is a priority not only for the quality of life, but also the dollars and cents it brings into the community.

“ The thing is that the only way people can get there is through Apache Junction,” he said of how Lost Dutchman can help local businesses. “ It is the traffic that keeps bringing them through here.”

Traffic is one thing Lost Dutchman State Park has, according to Tom Fisher, Lost Dutchman State Park manager.

Mr. Fisher says the park had a record March with 25,650 paying customers and seeing numbers like that is a good sign for local business owners, he says.

“ Roughly to Apache Junction that is \$4.1 million and the surrounding areas,” he said of park users buying at local businesses accompanying the annual patron tally.

While 100,000 is the official number for total paying customers visiting the park last calendar year, Mr. Fisher says the number is most likely three times that amount.

“There is about a 3-1 ratio,” he said of paying customers compared to those who just visit for a quick chat at the park’s visitor center. “We believe it is three times the paid visitation.”

High attendance numbers or not, Lost Dutchman State Park will close if at least \$24,000 is not raised by June 3.

“It is not something that is not going to happen if the funds are not raised,” he pointed out. “For me, it probably means early retirement.”

While Mr. Fisher has only managed the park for 1.5 years, he is a 25-year veteran of Arizona state parks and has never seen such tough times as now faced by the parks system.

“It is pretty rare that we have wilderness next to a major metropolitan area. That (the proposed closure) would obviously be a loss to that,” he pointed out. “This is the closest place that you can get away from it.”

But as shaky as state finances are, no one really knows what the next fiscal year will bring, Ms. Bilbrey says.

“Well, the park is scheduled to be closed on June 3 and we don’t know if there is going to be another sweep,” she said of budget cuts to state funding. “The community is coming together with all kinds of ways to raise money. There has been a lot of efforts made to bridge this cash gap to keep all the parks open.”

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