



April 21, 2017

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95 University Ave. W.  
Minnesota Senate Bldg., Room 3207  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Dan Fabian  
State Office Building, Room 359  
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Senator Carrie Ruud  
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Representative Josh Heintzeman  
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Senator Torrey Westrom  
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Representative Chris Swedzinski  
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Senator Andrew Mathews  
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Representative Jim Newberger  
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Senator David Tomassoni  
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Representative Rob Ecklund  
State Office Building, Room 311  
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Dear Omnibus Environment & Natural Resources Policy and Finance Bill Conferees,

As the Conference Committee convenes to reconcile differences in the House and Senate versions of the Omnibus Environment & Natural Resources Policy and Finance bill (H.F. 888 and S.F. 723), the Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota would like to express our concerns about the proposed bills as they relate to Minnesota's state parks and trails. In their current form, the finance bills would severely underfund the parks and trails that so many Minnesotans use and love. At a time when the state has a \$1.6 billion surplus, it doesn't make sense to pass a budget that would shorten park operating seasons, potentially close some parks all together, and threaten park and trail staff with layoffs.

Adequately funding Minnesota state parks and trails is not a new challenge. Less than one year ago the DNR was being forced to contemplate reducing staff and shorten operating seasons at numerous state parks. The legislature responded to that challenge by appropriating an additional \$2.8 million of general



funds as a one-time fix. Those emergency funds were vital in keeping our state parks open and operating, but regrettably are not included in H.F. 888 nor S.F. 723. The consequences of inadequate general fund support for state parks and trails will be felt across Minnesota; according to the DNR, up to 120 staff will have their hours reduced or positions eliminated, camping opportunities will be reduced at up to 34 state parks, and trail grooming and maintenance activities will be curtailed.

In contrast, Gov. Dayton has recommended a \$60.5 million general fund appropriation for the upcoming biennium that would stabilize the state park budget and allow the DNR to operate and maintain our state parks and trails to current standards. **We urge you to stand up for Minnesota's special places and fully fund them at the \$60.5 million level.**

Additionally, we are concerned the House bill disproportionately increases state park entrance fees. We appreciate the House's recognition of the need for increased funding for our state parks system, but we feel it is leaning too heavily on fee increases as part of its funding mix. The governor and DNR have also recommended increasing state park fees, but they balance these fee increases with an increase in general fund support. Compared to the modest fee increases proposed by the governor and DNR, the House bill would increase state park entrance fees from \$25 to \$35 for an annual pass and from \$5 to \$7 for a daily pass. That proposal is double the governor's recommendation and would make Minnesota's state parks the most expensive to visit among neighboring states. The House's proposed fee increases would also go beyond what visitors have indicated they are willing to pay in customer surveys. Excessive fees only serve to disconnect people from the outdoors, which is contrary to one of the foundational goals of the voter-approved Legacy Amendment.

The state park and trail system does need additional funding, but a reliance solely on increased user fees is not an efficient or sustainable way to cover the costs. Parks and trails do not just benefit the visitors who step foot in them. State parks and trails are community and statewide assets that benefit everyone, protect natural resources, promote general health, improving quality of life and attract tourists to our great state. **We urge you oppose state park entrance fee increases in excess of those proposed by the governor and DNR.**

We appreciate all your past support and work on behalf of Minnesota's state parks and trails, and thank you for considering our concerns on these important policy and funding decisions for the state of Minnesota.

Sincerely,



Brett Feldman  
Executive Director

Cc: Governor Mark Dayton  
Speaker of the House Kurt Daudt  
Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka