

State Park Advisory Committee
Report to the



Texas Parks & Wildlife Commission
August 2006

TEXAS STATE PARKS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

August 24, 2006

Hon. John T. Montford
San Antonio, Texas
Chair

Dear Chairman Fitzsimons:

Hon. Clyde Alexander
San Antonio, Texas

The members of the Texas State Park Advisory Committee unanimously are pleased to present the attached findings and recommendations related to Texas' state parks. Our desire is that the state park system embody the natural and cultural heritages that have long been the hallmark of Texas' best images to America and the world.

George Bristol
Austin, Texas

Hector Gutierrez
El Paso, Texas

As Texans have juggled a number of urgent public policy priorities in recent years, our state parks have fallen into neglect. We risk failing in our role as stewards of our public lands, despite the work of a number of committed groups and individuals.

Ann Hamilton
Houston, Texas

Hon. Al Henry
Houston, Texas

Taken as a whole, our recommendations call for a 10-year partnership between the people of Texas, its institutions and elected officials. We hope through these partnerships more can be accomplished sooner.

Ann Lents
Houston, Texas

Brad Locker
Brownwood, Texas

Throughout our deliberations we used as our guidelines your original charges, working closely with TPWD staff to ensure that we contemplated current, accurate and realistic needs calculations. We heard from a number of experts in the various areas of tourism, recreation and needs assessment. We believe the results are an accurate reflection of how best to systematically begin to address those needs. We cannot accomplish everything at once, but we can and must begin now.

Michael Massey
Richardson, Texas

Beth McDonald
Austin, Texas

We believe that our recommendations are not only sound public policy, but they are also a sound economic investment. State parks attract 10,000,000 visitors annually, generating economic activity of \$793 million in sales impact, \$456 million in Texans' personal income and 11,928 jobs.

Sandy McNab
San Antonio, Texas

Jeff Rogers
Dallas, Texas

We believe the appropriate source of funding for this endeavor is the "sporting goods tax," (that portion of the existing state sales tax derived from sporting goods) which was created in 1993 to serve as a source of support for our state parks. The sporting goods tax now produces over \$100 million in revenues annually, enough to wholly support our recommendations.

Andrew Sansom
San Marcos, Texas

Dianne Dies Schoch
Austin, Texas

Texans and her visitors deserve and need access to recreational spaces. It provides respite in our daily lives and fosters the family values of which we so often speak. We ask that the Commission fully consider these recommendations.

Paul Serff
Austin, Texas

Carter Smith
San Antonio, Texas

Sincerely,

David Woodcock
College Station, Texas


John T. Montford
Chair

Texas State Parks Advisory Committee

Texas State Park Advisory Committee Recommendations and Findings

Executive Summary

Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission Chairman tasked the State Parks Advisory Committee with considering and making recommendations in four areas:

- Funding options to properly care for the existing state park system
- Any existing units of the system that might be operated by more appropriate entities
- The role of public-private partnerships in parks
- Options to secure the future needs for state and local parks identified in the TPW Land and Water Resources Conservation and Recreation Plan.

Having divided itself into subcommittees and met over the course of several months in 2006, the Committee has set 10-year goals of funding and enhancement to insure that the State Parks of Texas are:

- Properly maintained
- Adequately staffed
- Accessible to the people of Texas and their guests
- Attractive and attracting to out-of-state tourists

These recommendations are made with an understanding that tourism is an important industry in modern Texas, and that quality of life issues are critical to maintaining a healthy economy and that natural and historical areas raise the spiritual, physical and values well-being of our citizens, now and in the future.

Our State Parks

More than 10 million people visit the state parks annually, generating \$793 million in sales impact, \$456 million in Texans' personal income, and 11,928 jobs.

Of the 28 reasons out-of-state visitors choose to visit Texas, 13 are State Park experiences.

Texas ranks 49th in the nation in state spending per capita for state park operations.

Less than **one-fifth** of the estimated tax revenues generated by sporting goods sales (enacted by the Legislature in 1993 to support the park system) actually go to the park system.

Voters in 2001 approved \$101 million in bonds to support repairs in the State Parks, but barely more than one-half of that money has been made available to Parks & Wildlife.

The State Park Advisory Committee issues the following responses to the Chairman's request for examination and advisement.

Recommendation 1:

The Legislature should appropriate all revenues generated by the Sporting Goods Sales Tax as well as other user fees and taxes presently directed to the Parks system and to the maximum extent possible, those funds should be applied to the purposes intended.

Recommendation 2:

The state should issue all bonds already approved by voters to provide for state park repairs and maintenance.

Recommendation 3:

The state should pursue a major program of acquisition and development of new parks as well as the enhancement of existing parks.

Recommendation 4:

Texas Parks and Wildlife should continue to transfer existing units of the park system to local governments or other entities where appropriate. Site transfers should not take place except where there is a significant savings to the State of Texas **and** where appropriate requirements and restrictions are implemented for future uses of the site.

Recommendation 5:

Texas Parks & Wildlife Department should work with the Legislature, non-profit organizations and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation to maximize and facilitate donations of private lands and dollars and identify and remove statutory and administrative hurdles to such donations.

Recommendation 6:

Texas Parks and Wildlife should continue and increase its emphasis on collaborative public-private partnerships. Projects such as Government Canyon State Natural Area, and the friends groups at State Historic Sites such as Washington-on-the Brazos and Casa Navarro in San Antonio, should serve as models for the Department.

Collectively, the above recommendations would accomplish the following goals:

- Provide funding for identified operational, equipment and local park grant needs (approximately \$45,434,083 annually above current funding levels)
- Establish a ten-year capital program of major repairs and acquisition and development. This might be partially funded by bonds presently approved by voters, on a pay-as-you-go basis at approximately \$40 million per year, or to avoid rapidly escalating acquisition costs, could be financed using new bonds, at an approximate annual expense of \$34,340,000.

- Adhere to the ten-year Land and Water Resources Conservation and Recreation Plan completed at the direction of the Legislature in 2003.

Despite the dedication of a portion of the sales tax collected on sporting goods specifically intended to provide a funding stream for state parks, and voter approval of over \$100 million in bonds to fund major repairs expenses, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department continually struggles to fund the minimum needs of our state's parks. Only \$55 million of the bonds have been issued. The taxes on sporting goods generate over \$100 million annually, yet less than one-fifth of that amount (approximately \$20 million in FY '06) is appropriated to the Department.

With proper funding, the Department could address current problems and create a solid foundation for the conservation and recreational needs of future generations. The revenues currently generated by park users and outdoor recreation enthusiasts through the existing "sporting goods tax" as well as other direct users taxes and fees, in large measure fund our parks. With improved existing facilities and additional parks, the committee believes that there will be an even greater return on Texas' investment in the future. These investments will result in a more effective park system that will generate even greater revenues in communities and regions associated with State Parks and State Historic Sites.

Local Park Grants

Political subdivisions throughout the State of Texas depend on grants from TPWD through the Texas Recreation and Parks Account (TRPA) to stimulate the acquisition and development of parks and recreational areas.

The matching grants provided by the TPWD are utilized for the planning, acquisition, and/or development of park and recreational areas, or open space areas to be owned and maintained by the political subdivision.

Funds granted to political subdivisions under the TRPA and Local Park Fund guidelines have funded 1,013 projects of the 2,825 submitted over 25 years, delivering over \$622 million dollars to the local Texas economy.

REPORT TO THE TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE COMMISSION FROM THE STATE PARK ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Background

The Texas State Park system contains 114 units which conserve natural and cultural resources, provide recreational and educational opportunities, and foster an understanding of the diversity of Texas' lands and heritage for all generations. Parks also provide opportunities for youth education programs, family outings, hiking, camping, fishing, and hunting. Our park system should exemplify why Texans take pride in their state. Our park system also provides significant economic benefits to the state, as research has shown that 13 of the 28 reasons out of state visitors choose to visit Texas are State Park experiences. More than **10 million visitors** generate \$793 million in sales impact, \$456 million in Texans' personal income, and 11,928 jobs in park communities. Much of this activity comes in rural Texas.

The cost of operating state parks is a small fraction of state finances. Park use fees and taxes related to recreation and park use provide most of the funding for the current State Parks operating budget of \$56 million. Despite this, the Texas State Park's budget has been in continuous decline for many years in relation to the costs to operate the system. The cost of maintaining the park system has grown due to the cumulative effects of unfunded personnel costs, additional areas to manage and operating cost increases such as fuel, utilities and equipment repair. These costs are compounded by an aging infrastructure of buildings and support facilities. Thirty-one of the parks were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's, and many others include historic buildings that are more than 100 years old. Sixty percent of all state parks are more than 20 years old. All of these factors have caused operational needs to far exceed authorized funding levels.

Texas ranks 49th in the nation in state spending per capita for state park operations. In 1990, operating expenditures by the state on parks accounted for 0.40% (four tenths of one percent) of the state's operating budget. By 2003, this had dropped to 0.15% (fifteen one-hundredths of one percent) of the state budget. Because of this decline, coupled with ever-increasing costs, additional, legislatively mandated areas to manage and increased personnel costs, the state park operating costs are now between \$6 and \$8 million more than in 2002, while the budget has remained virtually flat. This has led to layoffs, partial closings, reduction of maintenance and curtailment of park programs. These reductions in staffing and opening hours also create significant economic hardships on local communities and regions, and are causing a lack of confidence in the quality and availability of the park system that is impacting our tourism industry.

Replacement of tractors, mowers and other power equipment needed to properly maintain park sites has not occurred in a timely manner for many years. As an example, the State

Park system has a vehicle fleet of approximately 900 vehicles, with an average age of over 10 years. More than half of the fleet vehicles have accumulated more than 100,000 miles, yet the park system received authorization for the purchase of only two vehicles in the FY04/05 biennium. Unserviceable large mowers and tractors are routinely used for parts to fix other broken equipment.

Many facilities are almost impossible to maintain. Bathrooms in some parks are in such bad condition that they are either padlocked or very difficult to keep clean and sanitary and should be replaced. Voters approved \$101 million in bond funding in Proposition 8 to address some of these repair needs, but only \$55 million of these funds have been made available to the agency. The current backlog of facility repair projects for parks is \$431 million.

Consistent funding for cyclic maintenance and major repair work is needed to avoid the variance in available funding which causes inefficiencies, delays and increased costs.

Funding is also needed to provide for the addition of land and needed facilities to improve the quality of existing parks and to acquire new parks and develop them to meet the needs of a growing Texas population.

Committee Report

The State Park Advisory Committee worked with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department staff to investigate the needs of the system and determine methods to address these needs. The Committee believes that adoption of the recommendations as presented would benefit the citizens of the state through increased economic activity and a better quality of life. The actions recommended would also allow the State Park system to meet its mission of conserving the natural and cultural resources of the state for present and future generations.

The Chairman's Charges to the Committee

The State Parks of Texas, beginning with the establishment of the San Jacinto Battlefield site in 1907 have grown to a system of 114 sites representing important pieces of Texas' natural and cultural history. They are the annual destination for over 10,000,000 visitors. Tourism is one of the largest components of the state's economy and the state park system is one of the single largest elements. Much of the value is created in rural Texas. In conjunction with the obvious value of good, clean, family oriented recreational activities and places to learn about Texas's diverse history and lands, the economic benefits makes parks one of Texas' best investments.

The operation and maintenance of the park system in Texas has been in decline for a number of years. Flat or reduced budgets and increased costs have resulted in the elimination of numerous park operating positions, the reduction by half of routine repair funds, and the serious deterioration of facilities and equipment, resulting in reduced operations in approximately 50 parks in December 2005. The funding provided in matching grants to cities and counties to build new local parks has been reduced by over two thirds in the past three years.

The charge of this advisory board is to provide recommendations that address the following issues:

- **Funding options to properly care for the existing state park system,**
- **Any existing units of the system that might be operated by more appropriate entities,**
- **The role of public-private partnerships in parks, including concessions, sponsorships and other incentive based solutions, and**
- **The options to secure the future needs for state and local parks, identified in the TPW Land and Water Resources Conservation and Recreation Plan.**

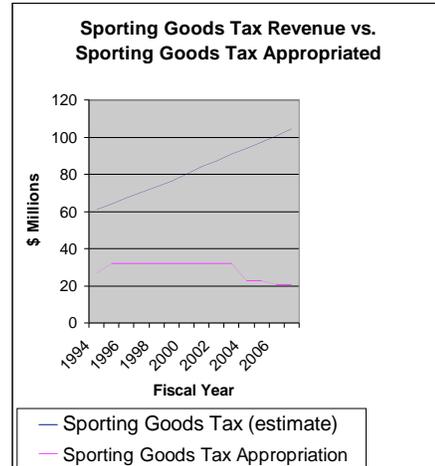
Chairman's Charge:

Funding options to properly care for the existing state park system

The committee believes that the current decline in the condition of the state parks is unacceptable and must be reversed. An overwhelming majority of the problems our state parks face is simply the result of inadequate funding. Three of the committee's recommendations relate directly to funding.

Recommendation 1:

The Legislature should appropriate all revenues generated by the Sporting Goods Sales Tax as well as other user fees and taxes presently directed to the Parks system and to the maximum extent possible, those funds should be dedicated to the purposes intended.



Recommendation 2:

The state should issue all bonds already approved by voters to provide for state park repairs and maintenance.

Recommendation 3:

The state should pursue a major program of acquisition and development of new parks as well as the enhancement of existing parks.

Recommendation 4:

Texas Parks & Wildlife Department should work more closely with the Parks & Wildlife Foundation to facilitate and encourage the donation of private lands and to identify and remove statutory hurdles to the donation of services, time and money.

Recommendation 1:

The Legislature should appropriate all revenues generated by the Sporting Goods Sales Tax as well as other user fees and taxes presently directed to the Parks system and to the maximum extent possible, those funds should be dedicated to the purposes intended.

Prior to 1993, funding for TPWD park acquisition, development and maintenance was provided largely by taxes on cigarettes. This funding source was problematic for two reasons: the source of the tax was not related to parks or recreational activities and the associated tax revenues were declining while demand for parks was increasing.

In 1993, the Legislature replaced the cigarette tax with the sporting goods sales tax, expressing their intent to provide a funding source that is reflective of the TPWD mission.

Under the Texas Tax Code, the term “sporting goods sales tax” refers to that portion of the State’s sales tax revenue that is attributable to the sale of “sporting goods.” “Sporting Goods” are then defined as “an item of tangible personal property designed and sold for use in a sport or sporting activity, excluding apparel and footwear except that which is suitable only for use in a sport or sporting activity, and excluding board games, electronic games and similar devices, aircraft and powered vehicles, and replacement parts and accessories for any excluded item.”

The revenue collected in sporting goods taxes over the amount appropriated to TPWD goes into the General Revenue Fund. Currently, the estimated revenue from the sporting goods tax is over \$100 million annually.

Full dedication and appropriation of the sporting goods tax is needed in order to commit all proceeds to park purposes, including additional park and support staff, meeting increased operational needs, conducting minor repairs and addressing the backlog of major repairs. Fully dedicating the sporting goods tax would also provide funding for grants to local parks, including a set aside of large grants for the most populous areas of the state.

An adequate funding level for the park system will be best achieved by ensuring that the Sporting Goods Tax is dedicated to the park system to the highest degree possible. The advisory committee recommends that legislation be drafted that would ensure the entire amount of sporting goods tax be appropriated to the park system. The possibility of establishing this dedication within the state constitution should be explored and implemented if possible. Further, the committee believes that there should be a direct tie between an increase in funds generated by the Sporting Goods Tax and funds available to the park system. Therefore, any legislation must include a mechanism to allow growth of appropriations along with the growth of the funding source.

Recommendation 2:

The state should issue all bonds already approved by voters to provide for state park repairs and maintenance.

The Department should be authorized to issue all remaining Proposition 8 bonds in order to complete much needed major repairs. In 2001 the voters of Texas authorized more than \$100 million in bond funding for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department projects. The majority of these projects were to address critical maintenance and repair needs in state parks. To date, approximately \$46 million of these bonds have not been issued, leaving many critical needs unmet in state parks. The passage of time since the authorization of

these bonds has led to increased costs for these projects, which diminishes the number repair needs that will be eventually completed.

Recommendation 3:

The state should pursue a major program of acquisition and development of new parks as well as the enhancement of existing parks.

The population of the state of Texas is growing at a rapid pace, yet there has not been a major acquisition and development program for state parks since 1967. Several previous works have documented the need for additional park lands.¹ The committee believes that \$15 million annually should be made available to provide for the acquisition and development of new state parks and for the addition of acreage and needed development of facilities in existing parks. These funds must be allowed to carry over from one fiscal year to the next to allow for the inevitable fluctuations of expenditures for both land purchases and development costs. The committee recognizes that land costs are continually escalating and that once developed, land may not be suitable for use as a park. Therefore, the Legislature, working with the department, should decide the merits of financing the acquisition program through the use of bonds or with a “pay-as-you-go” discipline.

Additional Considerations

Maintain state park funding currently provided from other sources including park generated revenue, unclaimed motor boat fuel taxes and boat registration fees.

The state park system currently receives over \$5 million from the Boat and Motor Sales and Use Fund. Similarly, the Unclaimed Motor Boat Fuel taxes provided more than \$14 million for state parks in FY06. As a major provider of water recreation sites, the park system receives a portion of the funds generated by these registrations. Continuing these appropriations will provide continued access to the public for water based recreation at more than 45 parks with boating opportunities.

Adoption of best business practices for use of the different funding streams available to the system

¹ *Texas Parks and Wildlife in the 21st Century*, compiled by Texas Tech University in 2001; *Taking Care of Texas — a Report from the Governor's Task Force on Conservation* in 2000; and *Texas Outdoors — A Vision for the Future* compiled by Texas A&M University in 1998. Additionally, A Statewide Significance Study of heritage sites developed jointly by staff of TPWD and THC, and reviewed by the TPWD Historic Sites Advisory Committee, identified the need to fill some gaps in the current inventory in order to reflect the cultural and historical richness of the state's history.

The Department should develop a priority needs list based on available revenue streams. In particular, projects or categories of projects that would be most appropriate for funding by existing or future bond issues will be identified. These may include acquisition, development and repair projects.

The department should consider, to the extent possible, using the park generated revenue stream to pay the variable costs of operations, such as utilities, hourly staff salaries and consumable supplies. This would permit any funds generated through increased revenue certification to be directed towards those costs that escalate with increased park utilization. SGT funds should be directed to the fixed costs of system operation and maintenance, including classified personnel costs.

The committee believes that the “Entrepreneurial Rider” (Rider 27 in the current biennium appropriation) is both a useful incentive to park staff and an important tool in operating the state park system in a business-like manner. Therefore, the department is encouraged to link the expenditure of self-generated revenue to the variable costs of the system. This linkage will enable the most stable funding sources to be used for the care and protection of park resources, while those costs that result largely from visitor use, such as utilities and consumable supplies, can be borne by those users.

Summary of Additional Needs

The following needs must be addressed in order to properly operate and maintain a quality park system. This funding level will deliver quality, but not extravagant, services and facilities, but will require significant increases above current funding levels.

Major Repairs \$25 million

The currently identified backlog of facility repair needs made necessary by the wear occasioned by millions of visitors in state parks is approximately \$431 million. In order to keep pace with necessary renovations a dependable annual funding source for major repairs is necessary. The committee recommends that \$25 million annually be directed to major repairs in addition to the \$4 million recommended for minor repair.

Human Resources \$7.1 million

The committee recommends an additional 159 classified staff and 70.5 hourly FTEs be added to the state park system. Ninety-two of these classified positions are restorations of jobs eliminated in recent years. This recommendation would be a net increase of 67 positions across the state.

Operating Funds, \$5.7 million

As additional staff is added (and inflation taken into account), there will be an increased need for maintenance materials such as paint and repair parts for park infrastructure, as well as fuel and lubricants for work vehicles. The cost of additional supplies and materials needed by the system is estimated to be \$5,705,121.

Minor Repairs \$4 million

There are nearly 4000 structures as well as trails, water systems and infrastructure in state parks and currently only \$1.5 million available annually to accomplish routine cyclic maintenance and repairs such as painting, fixture replacement and roofing repairs. Much of the park system infrastructure, such as the many buildings constructed by the CCC and WPA are now cultural resources in their own right, and must be preserved as part of our state's heritage.

Department Support \$2 million

During the same period that positions have been eliminated in state parks, positions have been eliminated in other divisions that support state parks, including infrastructure, communications and administrative resources. This hampers the ability of these divisions to market parks, support repair projects, and perform administrative duties. With additional field staff added, minor repair projects undertaken and other operational increases, other support divisions within the agency will incur increased workloads.

Equipment \$6.7 million

There is a critical need to replace aging and worn out equipment in the park system. The vast majority of state parks vehicles do not meet state standards for replacement. Other equipment also far exceeds normal replacement cycles. Sensible asset management dictates that equipment should be replaced on a scheduled basis as it reaches the end of expected service.

Land Acquisition and Park Development

\$15 million

The population of the state of Texas is growing at a rapid pace, yet there has not been a major acquisition and development financing package for state parks undertaken since 1967. The committee believes that \$15 million annually should be made available for the acquisition and development of new state parks and for additions of acreage and additional facilities in existing parks. These funds must be allowed to carry over from one fiscal year to the next to allow for the inevitable fluctuations of expenditures for both land purchases and development costs.

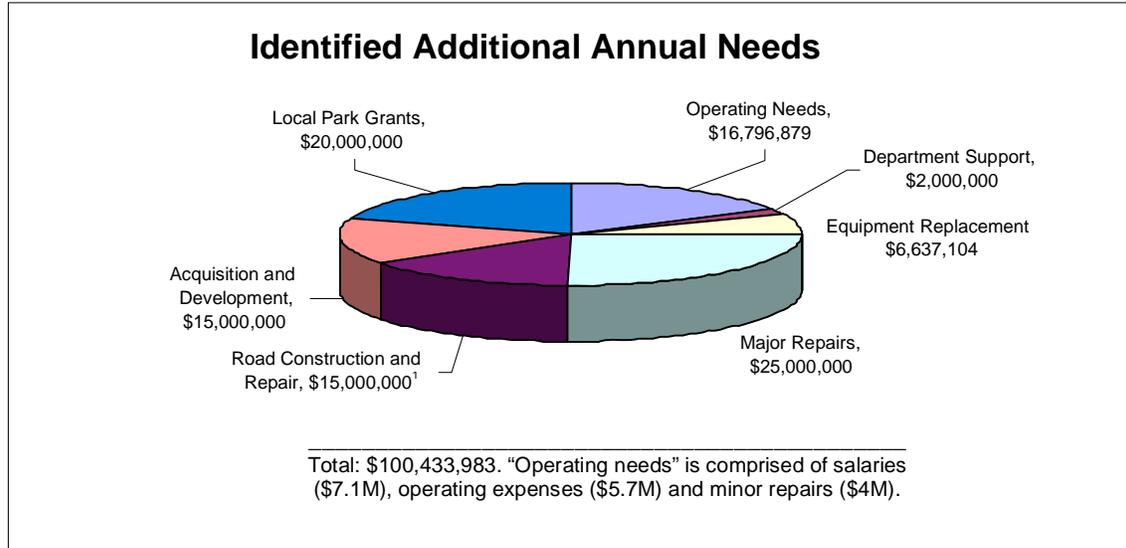
Local Park Grants

\$20 million

The Texas Recreation and Park Account, commonly known as the local grant program, has suffered the bulk of reductions in appropriations from the sporting goods tax in recent years, falling from \$15.5 million to about \$5 million in the current biennium. The committee recommends that the amount of the SGT dedicated to the TRPA be increased from \$5 million to \$25 million.

Reclaiming Excellence in Our State Park System

After working extensively with Texas Parks and Wildlife Staff, the Advisory Committee has identified approximately \$100 million in additional annual needs.



¹ The \$15 million road repair need is to be accomplished through negotiations between Texas Parks and Wildlife and TxDOT.

Therefore, the additional annual requirements can be funded using the sporting goods tax revenues if those revenues meet current estimates and are appropriated.

Current Uses of funding (2006) from Sporting Goods Tax		\$20,639,529
State Park Funding	\$15,408,287	
Local Park Funding	\$5,231,242	
Recommended Additional Above FY2006 Through Direct Expenditures from Annual Appropriations		
Operating Needs	\$16,796,879	
Department Support	\$2,000,000	
Equipment Replacement	\$6,637,104	
Major Repairs	\$25,000,000	
Acquisition and Development	\$15,000,000	
Local Park Grants	\$20,000,000	
Total Annual New TPWD Expenses (if paying from annual revenue)		\$85,433,983
<hr/> Total TPWD Annual Needs Funded by Sporting Goods Tax		<hr/> \$106,073,512

The Committee also considered the option of financing the above needs using bonds. The approximate annual debt service for \$400 million in bonds is \$34,340,000, which would reduce funding needs by approximately \$6 million for each of the first ten years.

The following table compares all existing parks funding sources and expenditures to that recommended by the committee.

	Current	Committee Recommendation	Recommended Change
<u>Revenues</u>			
Net State Park Revenue ¹	\$20,289,294	\$20,289,294	
Sporting Good Sales Tax	\$20,639,529 ²	\$105,000,000 ³	\$84,360,471 ³
Boat & Motor Sales and Use Fund	\$5,540,312	\$5,540,312	
Unclaimed Motorboat Fuel Tax	\$14,204,298	\$14,204,298	
General Revenue	\$336,056	\$336,056	
Total	\$61,009,489	\$145,369,960	\$84,360,471³
<u>Expenditures</u>			
State Park Operations	\$53,805,112	\$70,601,991	\$16,796,879
TPWD Support Functions	\$8,706,275	\$10,706,275	\$2,000,000
Equipment Replacement	\$120,079	\$6,757,183	\$6,637,104
Major Repairs	\$12,750,000 ⁴	\$37,750,000	\$25,000,000
Acquisition and Development	\$0	\$15,000,000	\$15,000,000
Local Parks Grants	\$5,231,242	\$25,231,242	\$20,000,000
Capital Account	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000	\$0
Total	\$81,612,708	\$157,046,691	\$85,433,983

¹Total state park revenues less approximately \$8.7 million allocated to Department needs.

²Approximately \$15.4 million allocated to state parks; \$5.2 million allocated to local parks through grants

³Estimated

⁴Estimated FY '06-'07 expenditures. However, it should be noted that this amount is only a portion of what was needed and sought from the Proposition 8 bond funds. In FY '03-'04 there were no funds forthcoming. This is disruptive, expensive and not good business practice.

*The committee also recognizes a \$15 million road repair need for each year of this plan (currently funded \$5 million). However that is to be accomplished through negotiations between Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Texas Department of Transportation.

Chairman's Charge:

Any existing units of the system that might be operated by more appropriate entities

Recommendation 4:

Texas Parks and Wildlife should continue to transfer existing units of the park system to local governments or other entities where appropriate. Site transfers should not take place except where there is a significant savings to the State of Texas **and** where appropriate requirements and restrictions are implemented for future uses of the site.

Since 1999, at the direction of the Legislature, the state park system has worked to identify and transfer management of sites that could be more appropriately operated by local governments or other entities. Included in the negotiation process were requirements imposed on the new operators to maintain the natural and cultural resources of the sites to proper standards. In that time, the following transfers have been completed:

- Old Fort Parker transferred to the Cities of Groesbeck and Mexia
- Governor Hogg Shrine transferred to the City of Quitman
- Jim Hogg transferred to the City of Rusk
- Lake Rita Blanca transferred to the City of Dalhart
- Kerrville State Park transferred to the City of Kerrville
- Port Lavaca and Copano Bay State Fishing Piers transferred to local governments
- Matagorda Island operations management transferred to the Wildlife Division
- Lake Houston transfer to the City of Houston
- Admiral Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg to the Texas Historical Commission and the Admiral Nimitz Foundation

The Committee recommends that State Park management continue to review its inventory of sites to determine if other sites are appropriate for transfer in the future. If sites that are not of statewide significance are identified for transfer, these sites should be transferred or sold to local units of government.

The committee recommends that State Park transfers to other state agencies not be considered as it will not result in a net savings. Additionally, the proper operation and management of parks and historic sites requires a variety of specialized knowledge and skills that are not duplicated in any one agency outside of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. These assets include law enforcement personnel, historic resource specialists, marketing and publicity personnel, as well as engineering, architectural and construction management skills.

Chairman's Charge:
The Role of Public-Private Partnerships in Parks

Recommendation 5:

Texas Parks & Wildlife Department should work with the Legislature, non-profit organizations and the Texas Parks & Wildlife Foundation to maximize and facilitate donations of private lands and cash and identify and remove statutory hurdles to such donations.

Recommendation 6:

Texas Parks and Wildlife should continue and increase its emphasis on collaborative public-private partnerships. Projects such as Government Canyon State Natural Area, and the friends groups at State Historic Sites such as Washington-on-the Brazos and Casa Navarro in San Antonio, should serve as models for the Department.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation should better define its role with the park system, and how it could facilitate donations of land for state park purposes. The Department should identify any barriers to accepting or using donations, grants, gifts or other private support provided through the Foundation. The Department should request that legislation be drafted, or amend Department policy, as appropriate.

Recognition is a key incentive to both individual and corporate donors. The park system should develop and implement a strategy for donor recognition that provides suitable public awareness, while maintaining appropriate aesthetic principles of parks. The recognition program should also provide consistent donor recognition throughout the system. Current policies should be reviewed to determine if barriers exist to the development of donor recognition programs.

The Department should also carefully review the highly successful partnerships that have occurred in the development of Government Canyon State Natural Area. This endeavor (discussed in more detail below) should serve as a model for future public-private partnerships.

Additional Considerations:

Experience has shown that park interpretive programming is a key to enhanced visitation, and is also a key component of the park system mission. Enhanced relations with academic institutions to provide meaningful educational experiences for student groups should be a high priority for parks. The establishment of corporate underwriting of educational programming should be pursued where appropriate in order to leverage park resources as much as possible.

The committee recommends that the Department develop a "gateway community" program that would coordinate support through volunteerism and encourage involvement of groups such as the chamber of commerce and nonprofit organizations. The program

should look to communities such as Monahans and Canyon that have cooperative relations with nearby parks that include promotional activities for the park and local business, as well as active volunteer programs and support for fundraising initiatives by the parks.

Currently, volunteer labor contributed to state parks is valued at more than \$6 million annually and equals approximately one-fourth of the FTE's of paid staff. The agency should continue its efforts to build and enhance volunteer contributions to the system. Further efforts should be undertaken to encourage partnerships with Americorps programs and job-training programs to further build the contributions of volunteers and outside non-profits. The department should pursue legislative action that would encourage the participation of individual volunteers by addressing issues of personal liability and vehicle use, and the restrictions on use of state funds for the benefit of volunteers.

The committee recommends that the Department review park operations to identify avenues for increased involvement by private investors or concessionaires. This may include statewide business opportunities, lodging investments in parks, as well as private tours and other activities for park visitors.

Texas is indebted to a number of individuals who have donated land for the establishment of state parks. Park sites developed on donated property include Bentsen-Rio Grande, Hill Country State Natural Area, Varner-Hogg Plantation, and Fort Boggy. The Department should work to build public awareness of these donations and encourage other individuals to leave a lasting legacy through the donation of land or dollars. The creation of tax and other incentives for donors should be explored that would encourage donations of land or cash.

Chairman's Charge:

The options to secure the future needs for state and local parks, identified in the TPW Land and Water Resources Conservation and Recreation Plan.

The needs of the Land and Water Resources Conservation Plan can best be met by providing needed funding to the State Park system. These funds are already generated by the users of the system of parks in Texas through the sporting goods tax. Therefore, as previously noted, the committee recommends the full appropriation of the sporting goods tax to state parks.

Summary

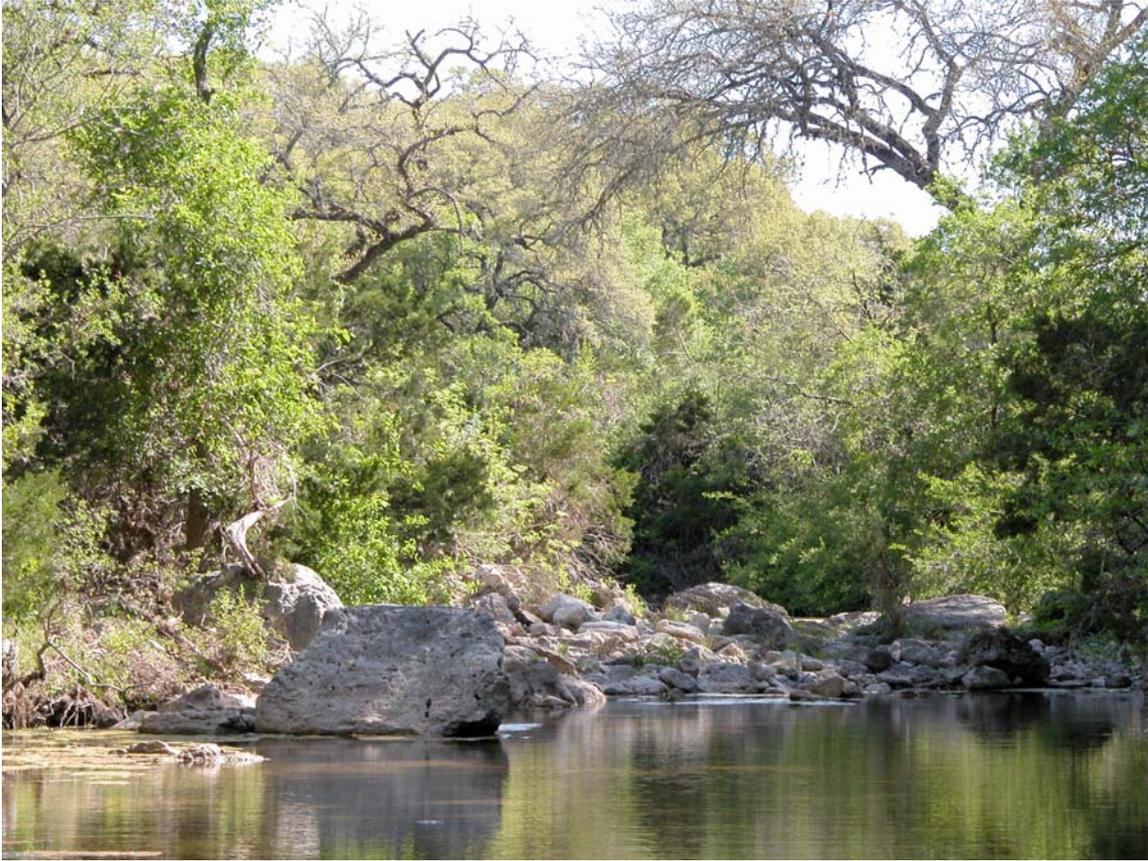
The system of state and local parks within Texas provide economic, personal health and cultural benefits to the citizens of Texas. It is clear to this committee that the state investment in this system has been inadequate for many years, and that the problems of the park system must be addressed now. The funding for increased investment can be provided from the existing sporting goods sales tax that is paid by the users of the services of the park system and will rise with increased use of the system. This has been borne out by other states, whose park systems have been in as serious condition as Texas.’ They have been able to successfully re-fund and restore their park systems, resulting in significantly enhanced economic contributions of their parks as destinations for tourism and as attractants for business relocations.

The needs of the Texas State Park system have been previously documented in the other studies. *Texas Parks and Wildlife in the 21st Century*, compiled by Texas Tech University in 2001, *Taking Care of Texas — a Report from the Governor’s Task Force on Conservation* in 2000, and *Texas Outdoors — A Vision for the Future* compiled by Texas A&M University in 1998 all reached the same conclusions, the state park system provided immense benefits to the people of Texas, that Texas state parks needed additional funding, and that the growing population of the state required additional sites be acquired in order to meet increasing demands. These conclusions are still valid, and the need has only increased. Every day that passes without action leads to further deterioration of park infrastructure, loss of historic resources and dissatisfied customers.

The time for action is now.

Government Canyon's Big Debut

Condensed from an October 2005 Texas Parks & Wildlife Magazine story by Carol Flake Chapman



Dotted with scenic vistas, caves and springs, the new state natural area is an 8,600-acre recharge zone for the spirit.

When you think of canyons, you might think of dramatic landscapes like the Grand Canyon or Palo Duro, where you can feel dwarfed by the deep gorges and precipitous cliffs carved out by water over the eons. By comparison, Government Canyon, which lies on the Balcones Escarpment northwest of San Antonio, is considerably gentler and more human-scaled, though it has its rocky retreats and panoramic vistas. The water that has flowed and seeped through the canyon over the centuries has transformed the hard Edwards limestone of the escarpment into a classic karst landscape of bluffs, sinkholes, crevices and caves. Water appears and disappears in a poetic rhythm of springs, ephemeral creeks and losing streams, eventually finding its way into the Edwards Aquifer below.

"Government Canyon kind of sneaks up on you," says Chris Beckcom of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, who has studied its terrain since it was first envisioned as a state natural area more than a decade ago by a consortium of citizens' conservation groups and government agencies. Its tranquil slopes and streambeds, shaded by stands of oak and cedar and the occasional mountain laurel, can come as a surprise, particularly if you've arrived there from busy downtown San Antonio, less than 20 miles away. "While you're down there below that green canopy, you'd never know

you're so close to a big population center," says Bob Pine of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, one of the partnering agencies concerned with the future of the canyon and its resources.

Most of Government Canyon, with its porous and fractured crust providing so many conduits for surface water, is considered part of the recharge zone for the Edwards Aquifer. But when visitors arrive at the newly opened natural area, they'll find a mosaic of habitats and features, each of which has played an important role in the history of the natural and cultural resources of the area. After a stop at the visitors/interpretive center, designed for optimal water catchment, you can walk north from the partially restored grasslands at the entrance of the natural area, following the curving pathway through the canyon first used by Native Americans, who refreshed themselves at the year-round spring at the bottom of the canyon. Later known as the Old Joe Johnston Road, the trail became a supply route from San Antonio to forts farther west, hence the name Government Canyon. And if you take one of the side trails to Chula Vista or to Black Hill, the highest point within the boundaries of the natural area, you can see the whirling rides of Sea World and, even farther in the distance, the Tower of the Americas marking downtown San Antonio.

"From there, you can see tomorrow coming," says Beckcom, meaning the inevitable march of the city and its suburbs toward Government Canyon, around it and beyond. In fact, it was not merely the beauty of Government Canyon that brought it to the attention of so many different individuals and agencies concerned with protecting the natural resources of this area. It was also its strategic location near the city and over the aquifer that made Government Canyon such a compelling piece of land. San Antonio, which is one of the fastest-growing areas in the state, depends almost entirely on the Edwards Aquifer for its drinking water. "It's unusual for a large city to rely on an aquifer for its drinking water," says Calvin Finch, conservation specialist with the San Antonio Water System. And because of its porous karst recharge zone, he says, "the Edwards Aquifer is especially sensitive in terms of potential for pollution."

In the 1980s, the canyon had been slated for development as part of a subdivision called San Antonio Ranch. The developers went bankrupt, however, in the wave of bankruptcies at the time, and in the early 1990s, when the core area of 4,700 acres wound up in the hands of the Resolution Trust Corporation, concerned citizens formed an alliance called the Government Canyon Coalition and joined forces with the Trust for Public Land, TPWD, the Edwards Aquifer Authority, and the San Antonio Water System. Eventually, the total number of groups and agencies involved in acquiring and conserving land and resources for the natural area would number more than three dozen. With the Trust for Public Land working out the details, the original tract of land was purchased for \$2 million, which now seems an astonishing bargain. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department took over the role of managing the land, and Government Canyon was designated a state natural area rather than a park. That meant a number of limitations were placed on the way the land could be used. Says Beckcom, "We came in with a very light environmental footprint on the site." As more land was added with additional purchases, along with additional deed restrictions, the natural area eventually grew to more than 8,600 acres.

Nearly as remarkable as the canyon's natural history is the way it evolved into a state natural area over the last decade, with an extended family of individuals, groups and agencies watching over it, each with their own concerns and visions of the way the land and its resources should be managed. "I think the social-administrative side of Government Canyon is as unique as its natural features," says George Veni, a hydrogeologist who was a member of the original Government Canyon Coalition, and who has continued as a volunteer with the Government Canyon Historical Society. "It should serve as model for other parts of the country as an example of how to make the most of the limited amount of money available for conserving land by sharing the load."

The Trust for Public Land, for example, became involved for a number of reasons in saving Government Canyon from the auction block, says TPL spokesman James Sharp. "Government Canyon is very special to us not just because of its beauty, its historic value and its proximity to a large population of people. One of our most important goals is to protect our sources of drinking water, and Government Canyon is crucial to the health of the aquifer." For TPL, says Sharp, it was important to keep going after the first major acquisition, "to keep the momentum going in acquiring more land and bringing in more agencies and volunteers. We wanted to make sure it didn't stop at 4,400 acres."

For the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, protection of Government Canyon's endangered species, from the blind invertebrates living in the caves below its surface to the golden-cheeked warblers nesting in its cedars, was paramount. Consequently, the most severe deed restrictions within Government Canyon are on the 1,100 acres that include a dedicated karst reserve and golden-cheeked warbler habitat. "The canyon is unusual because of its listed karst and bird species," says Pine. "It's rare to get a combination of so many high-quality habitats combined in one area." At least eight of the canyon's listed cave invertebrate species, he says, appear to be unique to Bexar County. The invertebrates, he says, also serve as canaries in the coal mine: "If the karst species can't survive, it can be a warning sign of the state of the aquifer."

For the San Antonio Water System and the Edwards Aquifer Authority, the canyon represented not only a chance to protect the aquifer, but to educate citizens about water conservation and the nature of aquifers. "We're really excited about the educational exhibits in the interpretive center," says Calvin Finch. Those exhibits include panels describing the Edwards Aquifer as well as ways that water can be carelessly wasted or thoughtfully conserved. For the city of San Antonio, says Finch, "protecting land over the recharge zone maximizes the recharge and assures the water will be in as pure a state as possible, with minimal pollution." It's important, he says, that visitors learn about how aquifers may become polluted and about how they can help to conserve water. "The more visitors learn about protecting natural areas, the better off our water resources will be."

For TPWD, Government Canyon represents an extraordinary opportunity to carry out the directives of its Land and Water Resources Conservation and Recreation Plan. The plan calls for acquisition of land close to urban areas, as well as increasing the opportunities for improving land stewardship for the benefit of water quality and wildlife. "I wish we could do this all around the state," says Cindy Loeffler, water resources manager for TPWD. "We're protecting habitat, watershed, parkland and endangered species, and demonstrating for landowners the benefits of good land stewardship."

With so many goals to consider and so many resources to protect, the business of planning and managing Government Canyon State Natural Area has proved a considerable challenge, as park manager Deirdre Hisler can attest. Hisler compares the canyon to an onion, with an almost infinite series of layers and complexities. "Every time you learn something, you realize there's a lot more to learn," she says. Something as simple as bringing in fresh soil, for example, can disturb the balance of native species of grass in the canyon because seeds of invasive species might be hidden in the soil. A brush-sculpting project in an area of the canyon known as Laurel Canyon has required years of preliminary study there and in the Honey Creek State Natural Area, located to the northwest. As her crew was working nonstop to get the area ready for its grand opening, there were times, Hisler says, when she thought of having T-shirts made up proclaiming: "Government Canyon: Where Nothing Is Easy."

For Hisler and all the other managers, volunteers and guardians devoted to Government Canyon, "the resources come first," as she puts it. And that means that the way visitors experience the area has been determined by the need to protect those resources. All of the facilities have been built on

the lower 700 acres, away from the recharge zone. And for the six months of the year that golden-cheeked warblers are in residence (typically March to September), their habitat will be closed to visitors.

And yet, the area's 41 miles of trails offer urbanites a chance to get away from it all, just minutes from busy streets. For a visitor who climbs to Chula Vista on a clear day, to see "tomorrow coming," it's apparent that Government Canyon offers a kind of protective habitat for its human visitors as well as its resident species. As highways widen and new developments spring up like new-growth cedar in the Hill Country surrounding it, Government Canyon, with its bubbling springs and its precious tranquility, is a recharge zone for the spirit.