

SC state parks move toward becoming self-supporting

The Associated Press

CHARLESTON — Amid record attendance and with revenues up \$4 million over four years, South Carolina's state parks are well on their way to paying their own way for the first time in the eight decades since the first park opened.

For the fiscal year that ended in June, the 47 parks and historic sites in the system brought in \$24 million — enough to pay for 90 percent of ongoing operations.

Making the parks self-sustaining has been a goal of Duane Parrish, the director of the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, since he assumed the job back in 2011.

"We're trending in the right direction but I don't want to get there prematurely and not be able to sustain it," he told The Associated Press in a recent interview. "We're trying to get to a point where there is no taxpayer money needed to operate the park system on a regular basis."

That has not happened since the Cheraw State Park, the first state park in South Carolina, opened in the 1930s. The park was developed with labor from the Civilian Conservation Corps on land bought in part with pennies donated by local school children.

While revenue and attendance has been up, Parrish said that in the past several years the system has also had to devote money to maintenance deferred during the recent recession. And there were additional costs for state employee pay raises and health insurance premiums. Personnel costs represent half the cost of operating the state parks.

"To achieve self-sufficiency, you don't get there by cutting expenses, you get there by increasing the revenue," he said.

A look at the park system blueprint:

New attractions

◆ A splash pad water feature will open next year at Sesquicentennial State Park outside of Columbia. There are also plans to expand the marina at Dreher Island State Park northwest of Columbia and add campgrounds and cabins at several other parks. All are designed to increase revenue with the splash pad estimated to generate up to \$400,000 a year. "When these revenue generators are in place in the next few years we will be in a really good position," Parrish said.

Dynamic pricing

◆ In the past, camp sites

and cabins at parks all were priced the same. Now visitors pay a bit more for those in better locations, as they might a hotel room. "We will still be the best price value anywhere you go in the state, but the campsite on a lake now costs more than a campsite not on a lake," Parrish said.

Increasing attendance

◆ Attendance at the parks, as evidenced by increased revenue, has been up steadily in recent years. Parrish attributes that to increased marketing and an increasing desire for people to get away from television, cellphones and social media. "There seems to be a need to get away from everything now more than ever," he said. Park attendance is expected to continue to increase, he said, with tourism research showing 20- to 35-year-olds more interested in getting outdoors than previous generations.

Capital investment

◆ The system will always need to rely on money from the General Assembly for land for new parks or capital investment. But, Parrish said, the secret will be to have those investments generate income for ongoing park operations.