

The Future of Pennsylvania's Parks and Forests Is in Our Hands

Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation presents a StoryMap of state park and forest infrastructure needs

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Brad Mallory, Chair of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation

future of Pennsylvania's state parks and forests is in our hands. Much like last year, the state's public lands continue to experience record high visitation. The more than 47 million park goers in 2020, a 26% increase greatly spun by the pandemic, contributed to existing infrastructure, maintenance, and staffing challenges.

The pandemic reaffirmed our need for healthy local natural resources and access to open space in the great outdoors for human health and wellbeing. This greater realization and appreciation of the parks and forests incidentally coincides with the 50th anniversary year of the Environmental Rights Amendment to Pennsylvania's Constitution, further calling attention to the need to

prioritize investment in the state's natural assets.

ERA: "The people have a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment. Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come. As trustee of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people."

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) is the state agency charged with managing Pennsylvania's 121 parks and 2.2 million acres of forest. Many don't realize that aside from picturesque views, rugged trails, and cascading waterfalls, these lands contain a great deal of aging infrastructure. There are 131 dams (47 of which are high hazard dams), 860 vehicular bridges, 3,000 miles of public roadways, and nearly 5,000 buildings. DCNR also owns and operates 172 public water supplies and 70 wastewater treatment plants. Yet, the general fund budget for DCNR's operations today is the same as it was 15 years ago. This is all despite increases in infrastructure, acreage, and visitors, and a resultant need for increased staffing.

Several years ago, the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation undertook a comprehensive study of park and forest maintenance needs resulting in the 2018 report, [The Legacy of Pennsylvania's State Parks and Forests: The Future Is in Our Hands](#), an in-depth look at ongoing and urgent needs. The report brought attention to a glaring need for financial investment, a figure that now totals \$1.4 billion dollars. Thanks to tremendous interest from the public and PPF supporters, from this information grew the [Protect Our Parks and Forests](#) initiative.

As part of this effort to acquire the necessary funding for the state's parks and forests, a 2021 update to the report is now available in the form of a [StoryMap](#), offering a graphic presentation of the information. The ArcGIS StoryMap was produced by Shippensburg University's Center for Land Use and Sustainability. The clickable presentation depicts former and current state park and forest operating budgets, guides viewers through the peaks and pitfalls of historic funding arrangements, explains former funding for land acquisition and structural projects, and provides a breakdown of current day expenses.

"Of the 38.6 billion dollar 2021-2022 General Fund proposed budget for Pennsylvania, only 0.36%, roughly \$139 million dollars, was allocated for DCNR," said Marci Mowery, President of PPF. "Meanwhile, Pennsylvania is fifth in the nation in consumer spending on outdoor recreation, generating \$29.1 billion in annual spending, supporting \$251,000 jobs, and generating \$8.6 billion in wages and salary and \$1.9 billion in state and local tax revenue, according to the Outdoor Recreation Industry."

"In many ways, the pandemic has brought to light these infrastructure needs as well as the importance of our state parks and forests for Pennsylvanians," said Brad Mallory, Chair of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation. "Closed pools, flood damaged roadways, and water main breaks are just a few of the related challenges which park and forest staff and volunteers have had to deal with recently."

This said, the pandemic also brought about an unexpected opportunity to fund this need by way of the American Rescue Plan. The ARP provides direct aid to state and local governments for infrastructure investment. Many states have chosen to apply some of this funding to invest in their parks and forests. It's time to put these funds where they are needed for the future of Pennsylvania's parks and forests so that they may continue to be safe and enjoyable for all, including generations yet to come.

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