

RECOMMENDATIONS

- » *Create a Fund for Green Space Efforts:* Use funds to conserve and protect green space. Alternatively, the state could create a Heritage Fund for conservation, recreation and preservation efforts to protect Georgia's natural green space. Furthering the creation of land conservation programs in counties throughout the state will foster protection of our state's green space. Successful programs already exist in several counties, including Cobb, DeKalb, Gwinnett and Paulding and could be used as models for a statewide program.
- » *Broadly Apply the Principle of "The Beneficiary Pays":* Charge appropriate user fees and allow those sites to keep collected funds to support on-site maintenance and operations. Enact legislation to support this effect where necessary.

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DEFINITION OF THE ISSUE

Georgia's parks, like many nationwide, are facing significant shortfalls in meeting maintenance needs and demands for access and services. The State Parks and Historic Sites Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), oversees the operation of 63 state parks and historic sites as well as 90 wildlife management areas (WMA) for hunting and other outdoor recreational activities throughout the state. The DNR's budget has been reduced by over 50 percent over the last five years. As a result, parks increasingly rely on fee-generated revenue and outside support groups for funding. Parks overseen by cities and counties in Georgia face pressures similar to state parks, however, funding cuts have not been as drastic. Fortunately, both financial and volunteer support for those parks that serve middle- income to high- income urban areas has increased. Also, cities and counties have demonstrated their motivation to continue funding parks in vital tourist areas where access to parks affects revenue to surrounding businesses.

In 2008, the recession caused many local governments to drastically cut spending on "non-essential" programs. While many active recreation programs were preserved, many organizations also reduced maintenance staff and budgets to "weather the storm," with the result that facilities have not received consistent maintenance and have deteriorated accordingly. In doing "more with less," facilities were kept open for public use, but maintenance and operations staff declined. However, since the last Georgia Report Card in 2009, most local departments are better able to manage and maintain their facilities than at the beginning of the recession. This is due in part to the following:

- Other sources of revenue have been identified (e.g., grants, private donations, user fees, etc.) so there is less dependence on scarce general funding sources
- Agencies have adjusted to the new reality and organized differently to provide the services and facilities most in demand from citizens
- In some cases, environmental programs have identified the benefits of green space for stormwater management and general urban life, so park projects have been combined with other environmental projects for multiple objectives



GRADE

The Georgia Section of ASCE has assigned Parks and Recreation a 2014 grade of D+. This is slightly higher than the 2009 grade of D and is based on the condition of the federal parks, state parks and municipal parks in Georgia as demonstrated by the deferred maintenance backlog at these facilities. Due to the lack of a dedicated funding source and adequate appropriations from the General Assembly, some parks are in jeopardy of being closed and the state is unable to protect and conserve additional land. These park systems are evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Sources of Funding
- Condition of facilities
- Attendance
- Conservation practices
- Comparison to other states

The evaluation is based on data through 2010. The data for state parks is current as of the recent budget cycle, June 30, 2013.

FACILITIES CONDITION

Many park facilities, both state and locally-operated, are showing signs of deferred maintenance and lack of repair. Table 1 shows that maintenance costs at state parks have increased by nearly \$2 million over the past 5 years, which indicates an increased emphasis on this vital need. However, the expenditure on infrastructure repairs has been reduced by 75 percent (over \$6 million) over the same period. The Parks and Historic Preservation Division of DNR estimates that they have accrued deferred maintenance in the range of \$100 million for parks and related facilities throughout the state. At some of the privatized “resort” properties in state parks, anecdotal evidence of wear and discoloration suggests the deteriorating condition of these amenities, which may not yet impact operations but will inevitably require much greater expenditures to maintain acceptable standards.

FUNDING

The Governor of Georgia, Nathan Deal, wants all state parks to become self-sufficient. By the end of 2013 the parks reached their goal of self-funding 75 percent of their operational costs. Many of the parks that have significant lodging operations have been privatized, including Amicalola Falls, Unicoi, George T. Bagby, Little Ocmulgee, and Georgia Veterans. Most parks have scaled back hours of operation and activities in order to keep core operations funded. Urbanized areas such as metro Atlanta communities generally have a greater density of parks, both active and passive, than other areas of the State. While budgets have also been strained in these areas, most facilities have been able to stay open or continue functioning, albeit on limited hours or staff.

There are also significant federal lands in Georgia like the Chattahoochee National Forest and the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge. As pointed out in the 2013 Report Card for America’s Infrastructure (March 2013), cuts proposed by the administration and Congress will likely mean closures, limited access, and limited services to National Park Service (NPS) park units in 2013. At the United States Forest Service (USFS), which manages national forests, grasslands, and other natural areas, budgets remain flat. The impact of funding at the NPS and USFS is unknown for federal lands in Georgia.

In addition, the Nongame Conservation Section of the Wildlife Resources Division relies on federal grants to provide funding for initiatives of national importance, such as sea turtle habitat restoration, and other non-game initiatives. It also raises funds through a \$10 fee for each special wildlife license plate sold, by the Weekend for Wildlife event, and the Give Wildlife a Chance annual income tax donation.

As a result of cuts, operating hours for most state parks have been reduced, and many programs for engaging citizens in state history and resource conservation have been cut in order to maintain funding for core services. Park support groups have increasingly helped fill the gap in funding and personnel shortages at state parks and have even funded expanded hours and new programs in some cases. Further reductions in services are expected as the Governor’s stated goal is to eliminate operational funding of state parks from the annual budget. The State funding goal does not consider the economic impact on the businesses that surround, or provide services to, state parks.

PARKS AND RECREATION

Table 1: Georgia State Parks & Historic Sites

	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012
Attendance	10,352,491	10,270,601	9,481,142	8,858,751	9,013,624
Revenue Generated	\$35,941,540	\$33,607,551	\$32,552,140	\$32,222,008	\$32,907,887
State Funding	\$23,554,721	\$22,971,195	\$14,676,612	\$13,388,086	\$13,189,970
Private (Other) Funding	\$7,636,002	\$2,505,948	\$8,071,322	\$5,860,852	\$5,113,065
Maintenance Costs	\$2,848,854	\$3,151,324	\$4,241,007	\$4,183,644	\$4,579,630
Infrastructure Repairs & Upgrade Costs	\$8,482,568	\$6,449,016	\$6,622,724	\$1,666,660	\$2,253,375

SOURCE: FRIENDS OF GEORGIA STATE PARKS & HISTORIC SITES, INC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

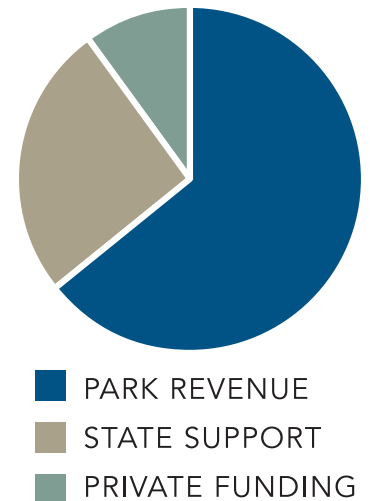
» **Actively Support Volunteer Organizations:** Encourage use of volunteers to offset reductions in operations and maintenance funding. The lack of funding for park upkeep has been partially filled by various “friends of” groups that provide labor on weekends and special events to maintain and repair park infrastructure. Outside groups have demonstrated their effectiveness in supporting local parks; however, most groups have demonstrated their support for capital improvements. Encouraging these efforts as a way to mitigate reductions in maintenance and operations should be encouraged.

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Recent data indicates that attendance has held relatively steady while state funding has been reduced by approximately 44 percent between FY2008 and FY2012. In the same time period, private funding saw a decrease of nearly 33 percent.

In 2012, state parks recorded almost \$33 million in raised revenue, and taxpayers provided an additional \$13.2 million from the state’s general fund for operations and maintenance. Private funding provided another \$5.1 million, primarily for upgrades and improvements to park sites. Many cities and counties are using Special Purpose Local Option Sales Taxes (SPLOST), bonds, and impact fees to fund infrastructure improvements. However, by law, these funds cannot be used for maintenance and operations.

Georgia owns 1.2 percent of land area in the state which places it 12th of the 16 southern states in percentage of protected land area. From a funding standpoint, while all park facilities across the country have endured severe budget cuts, Georgia’s park system still ranks significantly behind other states of comparable size. Georgia ranked third in the nation for acres of farmland and woodland being converted to subdivisions, malls and other developments.



USAGE

Table 2 (page 31) summarizes recent usage and occupancy for state parks.

A Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) is required so that state parks are eligible for federal funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The LWCF grants assist state and local governments in acquiring, redeveloping and rehabilitating outdoor recreational facilities and resources, but require a 50 percent match. The current SCORP was developed from information obtained in 2007, and was used to obtain funding from the LWCF between 2008 and 2013. The SCORP for the period from 2014 through

2019 is currently being updated and was not available at the time of this evaluation. Since the inception of the LWCF, 95 percent of Georgia’s counties have received federal grants through the LWCF totaling over \$83,000,000. Current federal funding cuts are expected to reduce the number and amount of awards from the LWCF for the coming 2014 federal funding cycle.

Table 2: Parks, Recreation and Historic Sites

YEAR	2009	2010	2011	2012
Average annual occupancy at state park cottages	47%	45%	43%	42%
Number of park, recreation, and historic site visitations	10,270,601	9,722,243	8,858,751	9,013,624

SOURCE: GEORGIA DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES DIVISION

According to the intensive inventory conducted by the University of Georgia for the SCORP, there are 2,340 sites managed by local service providers totaling 63,103 acres. A total of 1,405 of these sites are high-infrastructure sites such as ball fields, athletic fields and playgrounds, and the remaining 935 are low-infrastructure sites, such as green space and watershed protection-areas. Of these 935 sites, the state green space programs helped protect 310 sites totaling 9,692 acres.

The total land area of the state is roughly 37 million acres. Approximately 0.36 percent is owned or managed by local recreation service providers. Georgia’s population of roughly 9.5 million relies on a tiny number of high-infrastructure facilities for day-to-day outdoor activities. Statistically, that places a burden on parks to satisfy an average of 6,500 people per facility.

Relative to other states, Georgia lags when it comes to land preservation. Only 1.2 percent of Georgia’s total area is owned by the state, compared with 14.6 percent in Florida. Florida dedicates approximately \$300 million per year to conservation, 10 times the amount seen in Georgia. Georgia’s land conservation funding comes from the annual appropriations by the General Assembly, which varies yearly. Protected lands make up approximately 3.6 percent of the total land area of Georgia, which is typical of eastern states and southern states in general. Only Florida and Arkansas have a higher percentage of protected lands.

Atlanta is one of the fastest developing regions in the country, but it ranked last among cities of its size in acres of park land per thousand residents, next to last in park space as a percentage of city area, and in the bottom third in public expenditures on parks and open space. In spite of Georgia’s ranking as the 20th largest state in size, and 8th in population, only one city, Atlanta, made the top 150 in the Trust for Public Lands 2012 City Parks Survey. Within its category as a city with intermediate to low population density, Atlanta is near the bottom in terms of acres of park space per 1,000 residents (8.8), and when compared to cities of similar size in its category, it is one of the lowest in this group. For cities in the range of 400,000 to 650,000 in population and intermediate to low density, the average acres of park space per 1,000 residents is 16.3, with only Mesa, Arizona, and Fresno, California, having lower scores than Atlanta.

Georgians support parks through volunteer efforts and contributions. Eighty-five percent of Georgia residents support funding parks and recreation and 74 percent support increased funding for these facilities. Surveys have shown that property values increase an average of 20 percent when a park is nearby and that 57 percent of residents want to live near a park. Sixty-eight percent of respondents to the SCORP survey had visited a public outdoor recreation area during the past year and 41 percent did so a couple of times a month.

CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Local governments are increasingly required to undertake Watershed Improvement Projects to maintain their National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits. Since many types of parkland are located in or near wetlands or bodies of water, it is often possible to utilize funding from grant sources or utility funds to undertake programs that benefit both the environment and the park facilities. Also, organizations such as the Trust for Public Lands provide seed and grant monies to acquire and preserve the most environmentally sensitive properties – Smithgall Woods State Park in North Georgia is an example beneficiary of this approach – along with state funds. Absent the availability of such funds, however, there do not appear to be any significant recent initiatives to acquire public properties for the purpose of conservation. Conservation subdivisions are provided for in many local zoning ordinances, to protect sensitive areas while

PARKS AND RECREATION

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» *Encourage Land Conservation Through Organizations:* Several conservation organizations have been active in acquiring and protecting green space and private lands that have unique natural resources. The activities of the Trust for Public Land, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and other land trusts have gained prominence in recent years by funding the purchase of conservation easements and assisting state and local communities in their efforts to preserve natural areas and outdoor recreation facilities. These efforts have been further extended by the significant support of Georgia's philanthropic community. The state should also continue to partner with organizations to enhance recreational facilities. By partnering with charitable social organizations such as the YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy and Girl Scouts and churches, outdoor recreational facilities for public use have been developed. Facilities typically consist of athletic fields for baseball and soccer programs.

allowing the same net density on adjacent property, but the application of such programs has been sporadic due to the common requirement for public hearings. In general, there has been a reduced emphasis on conservation and land protection in recent years unless a clear economic benefit can be seen.

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