

# Virginia Association for Parks

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*“Supporting the Commonwealth’s parks,  
natural resources, and historic sites”*

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## History And Status Of The Initiative To Re-benchmark Operating and Maintenance Funding For Virginia’s State Park System As Of January 13, 2010

### INTRODUCTION

This document has been prepared to help put into perspective the operational challenges facing Virginia State Parks.

It is an historical fact that Virginia’s park system was an outgrowth of the economic recovery programs that were enacted following the stock market crash of 1929 and the great depression. Virginia worked with the federal government to develop a model system of parks in an effort to show the country how parks enhance the quality of life for citizens, stimulate tourism, and positively affect state and local economies.

At the outset, there was a recognition that parks were good for the mind, body, and spirit of citizens; a recognition that parks provided access to natural resources in a natural setting and benefited Virginia’s native flora and fauna; and, a recognition that outdoor recreation, nature, and Virginia’s cultural treasures were strong tourism drawing cards for the state and helped stimulate a tourism industry that was in its infancy.

On June 15, 1936, Virginia opened six new state parks that were hailed as the best planned and only system to be opened on a single day. It was said that the great depression made possible “the chance of a lifetime” as the state and federal government implemented projects like the Civilian Conservation Corps that built hundreds of state and national parks across the country, putting to work unemployed young men.

The infrastructure those young men built has sustained American families for more than 70 years, helping meet recreational goals while protecting our natural and cultural resources. Virginia Governor George C. Peery was credited with making the case that state parks afforded the working man the same type of recreational opportunities that at the time were only available to the rich and famous.

Virginia’s system has continued to be a national leader. In 2001 – 2003 Virginia’s state parks won the national gold medal award for being America’s “best managed” state park system. Annually, customer service surveys report that 97-98 percent of park visitors who respond to the survey say they would recommend the park they visited to a friend. As recently as 2007, Virginia’s state parks were honored by the National Association of State Park Directors as being one of America’s best park systems.

## RE-BENCHMARKING CONTEXT

- Major capital improvements to state parks have resulted primarily from General Obligation Bond Referendums in 1992 and 2002 that were overwhelmingly supported by the legislature and Virginia voters.
- Unfortunately, in Virginia operational budgets that are necessary to support system growth, including new facilities and new parks, are not systematically addressed in a comprehensive way when the capital projects are complete and the new parks and facilities are opened to the public.
- As a result, the state park system must rely on an ongoing effort by legislative supporters, the work of the Virginia Association for Parks, and the work of other groups and individuals who understand the park system's operational funding needs to advocate annually on behalf of the park system.
- Economic downturns, such as the one we are experiencing now, have routinely eroded away gains that have been made during strong economic times and progress made is often lost through budget shortfalls.

## RE-BENCHMARKING HISTORY

- Following the successful 1992 General Obligation Bond Referendum, Virginia's Governors and the General Assembly began to understand that the nearly \$95 million spent to improve existing parks and to acquire and develop new parks was placing an operational and maintenance burden on the system. Operational funding was not re-benchmarked to reflect the cost of operating these new facilities. This situation placed enormous stress on the entire system.
- Beginning in 2000, the Parks and Land Use Subcommittee of the Commission on the Future of Virginia's Environment co-chaired by Senators Emmett Hanger and Creigh Deeds (then a member of the House of Delegates) visited parks throughout the state, reviewed documentation, and held meetings to determine the needs of Virginia's State Parks.
- In its report to the Governor and General Assembly in 2002, the Commission reported that state parks needed funding for 112 additional full-time staff; additional wages for part-time and seasonal staffing, supplies, materials, preventive maintenance funding, vehicles and equipment totaling about \$12.2 million; and an additional \$8 million annually for maintenance reserve projects.
- The Commission's work did not consider the impact of the successful \$119 million General Obligation Bond Referendum passed in 2002 since this referendum passed subsequent to the Commission's Report.
- Thus, in 2004, the Virginia Association for Parks adjusted the Commission's recommended \$12.2 million to \$15 million to account for inflation (increasing cost of building materials resulting from various natural disasters and wars), for new facilities brought on line from the 2002 GOB, and to increase full-time staffing to 400 positions to address the new workload created by both the 1992 and 2002 GOB programs.
- Funding and staffing at these levels has been embraced in concept by the legislative money committees and some gains have been made toward these goals.

## RE-BENCHMARKING ACTIONS TAKEN TO DATE

- In 2004, re-benchmarking needs were set at a total of \$15 million and a total authorized staffing level of 400 positions for the 34 parks existing at the time.
- In 2005, operational appropriations totaling \$4.5 million with 57 new positions were provided.
- In 2006 another \$2.1 million and 21 new positions were provided.
- In 2007, another \$1 million and 10 new positions were provided.
- In 2008, another \$500,000 and 10 new positions were provided (\$250,00 and 5 positions for 2008 and \$250,000 and 5 positions for 2009).
- Thus, at the end of the 2008 General Assembly session, the re-benchmarking balance remaining based on the 2004 needs determination was \$6.9 million and 109 new full-time positions. ( $\$15 \text{ million} - (\$4.5 + 2.1 + 1 + .5) = \$6.9 \text{ million}$ ) and (400 total positions objective – 293 authorized (2 of these positions were designated for High Bridge, Virginia's 35<sup>th</sup> Park = 109 additional positions needed for 35 parks).
- The Governor's budget for FY-2009 imposed cuts of \$2,113,209 and his FY-2010 budget imposed additional cuts of \$2,383,500 on the Park System along with elimination of 12 full time vacant positions, 7 filled full time positions, and the equivalent of nearly 60 part-time and seasonal workers. An additional 25 full time positions must be held vacant in order to sustain these cuts.
- Given the accelerated inflation and the speed with which new 2002 GOB funded facilities are being brought on line, VAFP now believes that the \$6.9 million remaining balance based on the 2004 needs determination should be adjusted to about \$10 million to more fully achieve the goals of the Commission, the VAFP, and state park users. For example, the Park System opened more new facilities in 2006 than in any single year since the System was established in 1936. Given the addition of the 35<sup>th</sup> park last year and the designation of the two authorized full time positions for that park, the number of total authorized full time positions needed becomes 402.
- Thus, at the outset of the 2009 General Assembly session, the totals needed to complete the re-benchmarking initiative were \$12.1 million in funding (\$10 million adjusted target plus the Governor's \$2.1 million cut) and 109 new authorized full time positions.
- The only change made to the Park System's general fund budget during the 2009 legislative session was restoration of \$500,000 of the cuts imposed by the Governor for 2010.
- The outgoing Governor's budget for 2011 and 2012 continued the cuts imposed in previous years.
- Thus, at the outset of the 2010 General Assembly session, the totals needed to complete the re-benchmarking initiative are \$13.9 million ( $\$10 \text{ million adjusted target} + \text{the cut of } \$2.1 \text{ million in the 2009 session} + \text{the Governor's net cut of } \$1.8 \text{ million for 2010} = \$13.9 \text{ million}$ ) and 128 new authorized full time positions (109 balance needed at the end of the 2008 session + 19 positions cut in the Governor's budget for 2010 = 128 new positions needed).

## **RE-BENCHMARKING STATUS**

- **General Fund appropriations totaling \$13.9 million accompanied by an increase of 128 total full time authorized positions are needed to complete the re-benchmarking effort for the operating and maintenance funding of Virginia's 35 state parks.**