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EDITORIAL: Time for Assembly to reward state parks

BY THE EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF OF THE FREE LANCE-STAR 14 hrs ago

ON THE HOLIDAYS and the hottest days of spring and summer, the alerts roll in: "Lake Anna State Park closed due to reaching capacity. Traffic is extremely heavy in the area, please avoid the area."

No wonder. As one of the region's premier spots for swimming, boating, camping, picnicking, fishing and hiking, etc., Lake Anna State Park is a magnet for Virginians looking for summer fun. But it's no fun when visitors arrive to find the park already filled to capacity.

The situation at Lake Anna State Park is a good example of the limitations it and other state parks face because there isn't enough parking. Or because the number of bathrooms is inadequate. Or there aren't enough cabins for people who want them.

Both state parks officials and the Friends of Lake Anna State Park organization have hoped this could be the year that the General Assembly comes through with much-needed new funding as it amends its biennial budget.

Two budget bill amendments patroned by Sen. Richard Stuart, R-Stafford, and another in the House by Del. Buddy Fowler, R-Hanover, would add parking, picnic shelters and bathrooms to increase Lake Anna State Park's capacity. The 3,127-acre park with 10 miles of lake frontage has plenty of room for these expanded facilities. The regular at-capacity closings leave no question about the demand.

Altogether, 32 budget amendments were introduced this year to enhance funding for individual parks as well as park funding generally. They address everything from staffing to capital improvements to land acquisition to catching up in areas that have been chronically underfunded.

The reality is that few of these amendments are finding their way out of committee, but budget negotiations are ongoing and decisions remain on how Virginia will divvy up new funding headed this way due to federal tax reform.

Among the Fredericksburg area parks targeted by budget amendments, along with their patrons, are:

- Sen. Stuart: Lake Anna and Widewater state parks;
- Sen. Bryce Reeves, R-Spotsylvania: Brandy Station and Cedar Mountain Battlefield Park;
- Del. Margaret Ransone, R-Westmoreland: Caledon and Belle Isle state parks;
- Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William: Widewater State Park.

These amendments are worthy of careful consideration by senators and delegates. They would be wise investments in making the state parks even more accommodating, and therefore able to pack an even bigger economic punch than they already do.

If you didn't know already, Virginia state parks are perennially ranked among the nation's best, despite being among the least well-funded. Hard work, efficient operations and a cadre of dedicated volunteers make that happen, year after year.

But the fact that these preserved, natural spaces are making memories for families from Virginia and elsewhere every day is just part of the story. The numbers from a new Virginia Tech study on the parks' economic impact in 2018 tell the rest:

- Based solely on the state and local tax revenues generated by the parks, they return to state coffers \$1.26 for every \$1 the state allocates, so the investment pays dividends. Even more impressive is that each \$1 invested in the parks generates an estimated \$14 in economic activity because the parks attract people who will spend additional money nearby.
- The total economic activity stimulated by Virginia State Parks during 2018 was approximately \$338 million. Park visitors spent about \$249 million last year in Virginia, and about 46 percent of that was spent by visitors from out of state.
- The economic activity generated by the parks is credited with supporting more than 3,800 jobs across Virginia.

It is shortsighted to assume that status quo funding is sufficient because the parks are producing numbers such as these. Prior to a slight dip in attendance at some parks in 2018 due to excessive rainy days, the parks had been setting annual attendance records.

Time and routine wear and tear take a toll on the parks and their facilities, which means lawmakers must understand the value of upkeep and upgrades.

Virginia's state parks are among its most cherished assets and a source of public pride. Let's keep it that way.

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