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Legislators seek millions in funding for local state parks, but passage seems unlikely

Rob Hedelt 15 hrs ago



A visitor center opened in November as part of the first phase of Widewater State Park. Budget amendments to provide money for the next two phases of construction have not fared well in the General Assembly this year. The 11,000-acre park currently offers water access, bank fishing, a canoe launch, playgrounds, picnic shelters, canoe-in camping, restrooms and a visitor center. Long-term plans include a fishing pier, more picnic areas, camping and cabins.

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A few weeks back, state parks proponents were excited to see budget amendments filed by local legislators that could have provided nearly \$36 million for parks in the region.

They haven't fared well since. At this point, the funding and/or authorizations for Lake Anna, Widewater and Caledon state parks isn't included in budget bills working their way through both houses of the General Assembly. But those who follow state budgets are quick to say that things are never truly over until budget negotiators meet and sign off on a final package.

Even if that funding doesn't come this year, the requests and explanations of why they were filed provide an interesting look at changes and build-outs that could eventually happen at the local parks.

The park that had the most money included in the early rounds of budget deliberations was Widewater State Park in Stafford County, with a \$29.6 million budget amendment filed by Sen. Scott Surovell, D-Fairfax, and a \$7 million amendment put in by Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy, D-Prince William. The park along the Widewater peninsula sits in their districts.

The other large expenditures included in budget amendments were for Lake Anna State Park. Sen. Richard Stuart, R-Stafford, filed a budget amendment for \$7.1 million and another for \$170,000. House Del. Buddy Fowler Jr., R-Hanover, submitted a budget amendment requesting \$2 million for the park at Lake Anna.

Stuart's district includes some of Spotsylvania County, and an aide in his office said he included the budget amendment at the request of the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors for the park that is mostly in Spotsylvania and Louisa counties. Fowler also represents part of Spotsylvania.

Those budget amendments from Stuart and Fowler stem from an ongoing problem the park has in the summertime.

One of the busiest day-use parks in the state, Lake Anna State Park has had to shut the door to additional visitors several times in recent summers because the park and its infrastructure has been strained by crowds already drawn there by its lake-front beach, picnic structures, trails and amazing views.

According to Stuart's budget amendment, the \$7.1 million would be used for "critical parking, picnic and bathroom improvements to accommodate and alleviate the increased visitation and overcrowding at the park."

Craig Seaver, the director of Virginia State Parks, noted that state officials are "fully aware of capacity issues at Lake Anna, where we need more areas to serve the folks who are coming in for day use."

He noted that the money would allow a "concerted effort to develop unused sections of the park, specifically the Ware property we acquired years ago, hopefully reducing the stress on those busy sections of the park."

Johnny Finch, the former president of the VAFP and a long-time supporter of Lake Anna State Park who lives near it, noted that many people have focused on the mention of additional parking as if that's all that's needed to handle the throngs that come on busy summer days.

"I think that some people believe that if we get more parking, we could stop closing the doors on busy summer days," said Finch. "But to solve the problem, you really need to go far beyond that and address the infrastructure that's needed for those day-use visitors: more bathrooms, picnic shelters, water systems and roads to open up other sections of the park and allow those visitors to spread out."

"That funding would put a road into the Ware property, and some shelters and bathrooms over there," he said. "The top of that knoll on the Ware property is probably the prettiest view on all of Lake Anna."

Finch said renovating and/or replacing aging and over-taxed bathrooms and water systems is work that's also long overdue in the beachfront area and in other sections of the park.

The budget amendments for Widewater State Park would let construction proceed from the first phase of the park construction to a second and third phase.

According to the budget language, that work in Phase II would include "the construction of roads, trails, picnic areas, parking, sewer and stormwater" improvements, to be followed in work in Phase III for "more roads, electricity, water treatment, campsites, cabins and bathhouses."

Other amendments included one submitted by Del. Margaret Ransone, R-Westmoreland, that would allow Caledon State Park in King George County to accept "limited gifts, transfers or purchases of in-holdings or contiguous properties. DCR is interested in acquiring a property of approximately 455 acres known as Caledon Lakes contiguous" to the park. Private funds are being raised by a group of citizens for the acquisition of the property and donation to the Commonwealth."

At this point, that amendment doesn't appear to be included in the budget bill.

Tim Kennell, president of the VAFP, said his group was encouraged early in the process by the more than 30 budget amendments submitted to help state parks. But with only a handful seemingly still in play, he added, "We've got a lot less to talk about than we'd like."

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