

Politicians Pummel Parks *Fourteen parks down! How many more to go?*

By Ron Castle

Author's note: This article is the result of interviews with numerous State Park employees from across the State and in Nashville, including Director of State Parks Mark Williams and Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Public Information Officer Kim Olson. All interviews were done on the record and with the full knowledge of those being interviewed that their views would be combined with the views of their coworkers to create a composite of the problems with State Parks. Without exception, all State Park employees other than Mr. Williams and Ms. Olson asked that their identities not be revealed because of the fear of retribution and loss of their jobs. I am not a professional journalist. Personal opinions of interviewees are identified as such. Direct quotes are so attributed. Information that is presented as fact has been independently substantiated from at least two credible sources. While I have very strong personal views on the problems of State Parks, I have made my best effort to report the facts. Unless and until we have an educated public who demands reform of State government, our State Parks will continue to be vulnerable to partisan politics and patronage. Nothing, I believe, could be further from the original vision of the founders of our park system who voted in 1937 to create State Parks in Tennessee.

On August 29, 2001, Governor Don Sundquist announced the closure of 14 of 54 Tennessee State Parks and a reduction in the number of days that non-resort parks are open from 7 to 5 days per week, closing on Mondays and Tuesdays beginning Tuesday, September 4, 2001. In his announcement, Governor Sundquist stated, "One of Tennessee's most valuable resources is our beautiful landscape. I am disappointed that we must limit our citizens' access to our diverse parks across the state because the Legislature refused to invest the money necessary to keep them open."

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Commissioner Milton H. Hamilton, Jr. said, "These parks are truly the crown jewels of this state. They have become one of the best systems in the nation, and I regret that the General Assembly has refused to recognize their value. I hope these will be temporary measures, as we expect them to have a very adverse effect on our long-term ability to run a quality state park system."

An August 29, 2001, a press release from TDEC states that this action is required to balance the State budget, which the Governor has called a "disaster." The General Assembly has "arbitrarily" reduced appropriations for State Parks by \$2.5 million. Combined with a decrease in resort park visitation and revenues and unexpected increases in expenses for utilities and other items, the result is a projected budget shortfall of \$3.5 million at the end of the current fiscal year.

The Administration states that these and other cost reduction actions will result in cost savings that will balance their budget, that the savings will be reassessed continually during the year and modifications may be required to the announced plan of action.

During a telephone interview on September 10, 2001, Director of State Parks Mark Williams said, "Our State Parks budget for the current year is \$52,706,000, with \$31,076,000 coming from resort parks revenue and \$21,630,000 from General Fund appropriations. The estimated savings from closings and cutbacks is \$3.2 million. We will continue to evaluate the cost savings. I want you and your readers to understand that this is not something we wanted to do."

Despite the statements from the Sundquist Administration, the problems with State Parks are not as simple as a \$3.5 million budget shortfall. The problems are convoluted and layered. The problems cannot be solved only with money. In fact, too much money is part of the problem, money spent on the wrong things at the wrong times and in the wrong places. As a whole, the problems are the result of the long-term absence of professional leadership and the loss of the original vision of what our park system is supposed to be. To understand how we have come to where we are today, we need to examine where we have been. Otherwise, we will continue to

make the same mistakes that we have made repeatedly in the past. Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment.

A Brief History

In 1937, the General Assembly passed an Act establishing state parks in Tennessee, which reads, in part:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, that for the purposes of the Tennessee Department of Conservation the term 'park' shall mean and include any and all areas of land, heretofore or hereafter acquired by the State, which by reason of having natural and historic features, scenic beauty or location, possesses, natural or potential physical, aesthetic, scientific, creative, social, or other recreational values; and is dedicated to and forever reserved and administered by the state for recreational and cultural use and enjoyment of the people.

Be it further enacted, that every park under the provisions of this Act shall be preserved in a natural condition so far as may be consistent with its human use and safety and all improvements shall be of such character as not to lessen its inherent recreational value.

(Tennessee Public Acts of 1937, Chapter No. 266, Sections 1 and 2.)

Tennessee parks were founded on the premise that unique natural, cultural and historic features are enjoyable and educational in their own right, and that Nature has inherent recreational value without man made improvements. Parks are something that usually only government can provide: large tracts of pristine natural habitat with public access. Parks did not compete with commercial tourism or recreational enterprises. They were uniquely valued for the fact that they were not commercial.

The first Director of State Parks, R. A. Livingston, came from the National Park Service and had formal education and experience in natural resources management and work experience as a park manager. Since his departure, Tennessee State Parks have not, in over 60 years, had another Director of State Parks with formal education in natural resources management and experience as a park manager. Commissioners serve by appointment of the Governor. Directors of State Parks serve by appointment of the Commissioner. Other agencies in Tennessee have professional managers with formal education in their fields. This is what taxpayers should expect. State Parks have not been so blessed, the hopefully unintended victim of political patronage. The Act of 1937 did not specify a requirement for professional leadership.

Director Livingston stated in 1938, "Defined in a practical way, a state park is an area outstanding in either scenic, scientific or historical interest which is set aside for man's use and enjoyment, modified only by such construction as may be necessary to facilitate its proper use." Director Livingston's founding vision and leadership did not last very long.

Leadership is not the only area where Tennessee State Parks have been the victim of political patronage. Legislators soon realized that by appropriating funds to the Department of Conservation they could mandate the purchase of land for parks and recreation in their respective districts. During the early and mid 1940's the Legislature voted for the construction of fishing lakes by the Tennessee Game & Fish Commission, a division of Conservation and sister agency to State Parks. They also voted for special hunting and fishing regulations for their special lakes and surrounding properties with preferential regulations that were more consumptive than State regulations for the common person, and that did not follow the game management recommendations of Tennessee Game & Fish. This practice became so rampant that the outraged Tennessee Conservation League, led by Lucius Burch from Memphis and Herman Baggenstoss from Tracy City, forced the creation of the independently funded Tennessee Wildlife

Resources Agency, which stands to this day. State Parks were left behind and the Legislative pork barrel focus shifted from hunting and fishing to parks.

In the early 1950's plans were drawn and implemented, with funding from the Legislature, to construct Tennessee's first resort park. Paris Landing State Park on Kentucky Lake became the model for commercial enterprise at a State Park, complete with hotel and restaurant. The Governor was from West Tennessee and wanted a hotel in his home region. The founding vision that natural, cultural and historic features are enjoyable and educational in their own right, and that Nature has inherent recreational value without man made improvements was sacrificed to political whim that easily had its way in a time of opportunity. There was no professional leadership to recount the original purpose of Parks as defined by the Act of 1937. Twenty-five years is a very short time in the span of history, but a very long time in the world of politics. It is also a very long time to be without professional leadership.

After Paris Landing, politicians soon realized that there were no restraints to their whims. The next Governor was from Middle Tennessee and the resort park at Montgomery Bell was built near Dickson. The next Governor wanted a resort park near his home and Henry Horton was built, complete with an 18-hole golf course. Then came Fall Creek Falls, Pickwick Landing, Roane Mountain and Reelfoot Lake.

Good enough is seldom good and never enough. The original hotel at Paris Landing, constructed of California redwood, was razed to make way for a new concrete hotel built in the last ten years. The original hotel at Montgomery Bell, constructed of Crab Orchard sandstone, was torn down just a few years ago to make way for a new concrete addition to the previous new addition to the old hotel. And on September 21, 2001, the new \$14 million hotel at Pickwick Landing will be dedicated during a formal ceremony. The old hotel at Pickwick is still standing. The fate of the old hotel is undecided.

State Parks were managed under the Department of Conservation until the early 1990's, when the Departments of Conservation and Environment were merged to form the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC), the agency that manages State Parks today. Commissioners change when the governorship changes. They are political appointees. But during the past seven years we have had unprecedented changes in leadership at TDEC and State Parks: three Commissioners – Don Dills, Justin Wilson, Milton Hamilton; and four Directors of State Parks – Gerald McKinney, Del Truitt, Walter Butler and Mark Williams. State Parks has a budget exceeding \$50 million. Leadership changes of this magnitude in the corporate world would not be a favorable indicator of vision or sound management, especially if all of the chairmen of the board and chief executive officers lacked professional leadership, experience and formal education in their field of endeavor.

To their credit, our legislators, governors and other political leaders have done some good things for State Parks, such as large tract wild land purchases to create Frozen Head, Savage Gulf and the new Cumberland Trail. But the primary political and financial focus has been to create infrastructure as evidenced by the fact that our 54 parks are decorated with over 1,600 buildings, an average of almost 30 buildings per park. Recent bond issues for resort improvements since 1990 include: \$40 million to build convention centers at Montgomery Bell, Fall Creek Falls, Natchez Trace and Paris Landing; \$16 million to add convention facilities at Henry Horton and Pickwick Landing; \$20 million to build Bear Trace golf courses at Panther Creek, Natchez Trace, Harrison Bay and Cumberland Mountain; \$55 million to build the Bicentennial Mall in Nashville.

The fact that State Parks are in trouble is not a recent occurrence. Our troubles have a 65-year history as deep as a pork barrel and as wide as Tennessee is long. Our troubles are compounded by the lack of a dedicated source of funding other than legislative appropriations from the General Fund, capital investments in commercial enterprises that compete with private business in the state for valuable tourism and recreation dollars, hundreds of millions of dollars of depreciable resort park assets with high maintenance expenses, a shortfall in state revenues and

revolving door management. But the biggest trouble is a lack of professional leadership and the loss of the vision of the Act of 1937. The loss of the original vision is as clear as a recent statement made by current TDEC Commissioner Milton Hamilton: "We are not going to close those parks that create revenue. We are going to close only those where people come out to look at Nature."

As the old saying goes, "If you don't know your destination, any path will take you there."

State Parks As A Business

A question that has been asked countless times, especially by business owners in Tennessee, is why their privately owned hotels, motels, restaurants and golf courses should have to compete against state owned and operated resort parks that are funded in part with their very own tax dollars? Are there not enough hotels, restaurants, and golf courses in Tennessee? If there are not enough, free enterprise economics in this great land of unlimited opportunity dictates that when the risks of failure are adequately exceeded by the potential for profit, some entrepreneur will step forward to invest money and effort to create a hopefully successful business.

This process of evaluation and risk analysis was not used in the early creations of resort parks. The early resort parks like Paris Landing were created by political whim with public tax dollars by politicians with no personal risk, no "skin in the game." Repayment of bonds is not the responsibility of the politician who votes to put his or her name on a brass plaque at the new resort park in his or her district. Repayment is the responsibility of the taxpayers and that responsibility lasts long after the politician has retired from public office.

Businesses without risk have little reason to operate efficiently. It is a commonly known and well-proven fact that even the best of government is the least efficient way to do anything other than conduct military activities. This is certainly true with resort parks in Tennessee. Granted, resort parks do make revenue. Whether or not they actually make a profit is something that is very difficult to determine. The State Parks Division does not and never has used generally accepted accounting principles. This is not unusual in state government agencies, because most state government agencies do not run commercial enterprises that compete with private business.

Businessmen and women in commercial enterprises use accounting data as a business tool, one of the ways to evaluate the performance of their activities. State Parks cannot do this. An anonymous source with knowledge of State Parks accounting methods stated, "There is no good way to know how retail operations (resort parks, etc.) actually perform because we don't account for depreciation, we don't account for debt service, maintenance comes from a separate budget and administrative cost allocations are applied at a lower percentage to operations that we want to look good and at a higher percentage to operations that don't matter much. At least we are trying to do it across the board this year. That's never happened before." Numerous state employees stated in interviews that park managers never have a complete picture of the financial operations of their parks. Large capital expenditures, for example, are not reported to them in their accounting reports. Maintenance expenditures from the centralized Facilities Management Section in Nashville are not reported to Park Managers at all.

Whether a business executive or a commissioner, running a commercial enterprise without accurate, timely and appropriate accounting data is like flying an airplane without instruments. Where are you going, how long will your fuel last, what is your altitude, is your gear down and locked for landing? Nobody knows, including the pilot.

The idea that State Parks should pay their own way is not unique to Tennessee, but this idea is far outside the vision of the Act of 1937. User fees are one way to do this, and four parks have been conducting a pilot project to determine how the system should work. But the money received from user fees is currently appropriated only to maintenance. Director Williams said that, "Phase 2 of our user fee program will be implemented in October 2001 at 6 more parks. We

want to speed up the process, if we can.” Public Information Officer Kim Olson said, “We presently don’t have the money in the budget to do this at all of the parks. It is an expensive process.”

What About Cost Savings

Without accurate and appropriate accounting data, how can State Parks determine the real cost savings from park closures and reduced operating days for non-resort parks? Numerous park managers told me that reducing operations from 7 to 5 days per week saves almost nothing and creates numerous other problems, such as having to do maintenance work on weekends when visitation is normally heaviest.

When asked this question, Director Williams said, “Cost reduction has been a priority for over 18 months – saving money by postponing purchases, improving efficiency, turning the heat down and the air conditioning up, not filling employee vacancies – these are all things that we have been working on for a long time. Closing non-resort parks two days a week will save on utilities and operation of vehicles and machines. Besides, it gives parks a little time to heal. It’s good to have a day or two for things to heal back up.” Contrary to what Mr. Williams says, parking vehicles 2 days a week does not save money. The fee that parks pay to General Services for vehicles includes maintenance and gasoline and is a flat monthly fee that does not change if the vehicles are idle.

The Administration estimates in their August 29, 2001, statement that closing non-resort parks two days per week will save “over \$1 million.”

Georgia Director of Parks Burt Weerts, a 30-year veteran of the Georgia system with a professional background in urban management, economics and park management, when asked the same question regarding parks in Tennessee said, “I find it hard to believe that there will be any significant savings from closing parks two days a week in Tennessee. If this was happening in Georgia, there is no way we would save hardly any money from doing that.” Mr. Weerts visited Montgomery Bell for a National Parks Directors’ Conference last week. He says, “The Georgia and Tennessee systems are very similar.”

Several anonymous Park employees stated their opinions that the 2-day-per-week closures are all about publicity, politics and the income tax. One source stated, “At no time have the field people been asked for their ideas about how to save money or given the freedom to implement their own ideas. If it doesn’t come from Nashville, it’s not a good idea. They are not using the expertise of their most experienced people in the field. In fact, if you vocally disagree with Nashville’s ideas, you are likely to get booted. There are lots of things we could do, given the chance.”

Other Administration proposals to cut costs have obvious savings, such as letting seasonal employees go two weeks early, seasonal closings at Montgomery Bell, Henry Horton and Natchez Trace, and closing 14 parks. But the future expenses of recovering from some of these actions are not mentioned in the plan. And it is interesting to note that central office staff consolidations will only result in savings of \$97,000. This action is what you might expect from an organization with a centralized command and control mentality. The savings are the result of terminating two senior workers with a combined tenure of 50 years, workers who have been vocal in making their opinions known to management. Their opinions have not been in agreement with the management decisions of the current Administration.

What About Closures?

Over the weekend of September 8-9, The Tennessean reported on the ramifications of permanently closing individual state parks that have received Federal funds from the National Park Service Land and Water Conservation Fund. If closings are permanent, the potential cost to

the state could be in the millions of dollars. For more information about the law, check the internet at www.ncrc.nps.gov/lwcf/protect.htm.

According to "Histories of the Southeastern Park Systems" edited by Ney C. Landrum, "In all, Tennessee State Parks received \$24,744,080...of the Land and Water Conservation Funds available to Tennessee...through 1988." If State Parks closures are permanent, how much we will have to repay and when we will have to repay it is an unanswered question.

The Administration estimates that closing 14 parks will save \$1.4 million. What it will cost to start all or some of them up again is unclear and uncertain. Since this has never been done before, there is really no good way to know.

Besides the lives and livelihood of 184 employees, the next biggest concern is for the safety and security of unoccupied buildings and the environmental preservation of large wilderness parks, which are excellent hunting grounds and sources of ginseng, rare and endangered plants and poached timber. They are also an ideal hideaway for meth labs.

One state employee on the layoff list stated, "I received an official approved list of answers to questions for the press, local government people and visitors. What I am supposed to say about security is that rangers from other parks will patrol the area. The closest park is an hour or more in any direction. I am concerned that we will have \$500,000 damage before 30 days are up. Who's going to stop vandals and thieves? Probably nobody."

Director Williams said, "We are still working on security. We have three months. We will have a plan to keep facilities and land safe. We may have to have a caretaker at some of the parks."

Caretakers have been tried before at a state park. When Mr. Williams became Director of Parks, he decided to replace rangers with contract security guards at the Bicentennial Mall in Nashville, which requires 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week security. Director Williams decided to replace the two night shift Rangers with one contract security guard. The decision was reversed after three days because the security guard was found sleeping three nights in a row.

What a caretaker can do to protect a multi-thousand acre wilderness Park is questionable. Some operating parks currently lack the manpower and equipment to patrol their areas with a staff of trained rangers. Since the plan for security hasn't been completed yet, it is highly likely that the costs of security have not been deducted from the estimated savings from closures.

What About The Workers?

The Administration's question and answer release of August 29, 2001, states: "124 full-time positions will be eliminated. 108 full-time employees will be affected by these cuts. They will enter into the Department of Personnel's Reduction In Force process, including a 90-day notice. They will be eligible to move into vacant positions in their competitive area if they qualify. They may bump employees in the same classification and competitive area based on service. Part-time positions will be separated as soon as possible. Additional details may be obtained from the Department of Personnel."

The greatest tragedy of this entire process is the sacrifice of loyal park employees, many with 20 or more years of service. Ranger or Park Manager's compensation includes not only a salary and benefits, but also a place to live. Thus, those who are being "RIFed" lose not only their jobs, but also their benefits and their homes, all at one time.

State bumping and retreating guidelines allow employees with seniority to bump junior coworkers with the same job classification and within their defined geographic areas, even if the bumped employee is doing an exemplary job. The bumped employee can do the same to someone else.

The trickle down effect has significant potential. Or, an employee can retreat to a lower job classification if there is an open position.

Every park employee interviewed said that morale is destroyed. Efficiency is down. Changes will require moving and retraining. "It is," said one source, "a manager's worst nightmare. The employees are mad at me because they think I should be able to do something. There isn't much I can do except be empathetic and try to do what I can personally to help them."

If, in fact, park closures are temporary, will these same workers be available when parks open up again? What will happen to morale? What about training? What about efficiency? One RIFed source said, "I'm sort' a glad it's over. I need a new job. My spouse has been telling me for several years that I am an idiot for working for an outfit like this. I guess she was right."

What About Tourism?

The Tennessee Department of Tourist Development annually reports on tourism in our state. The most current reporting data is from 1999. Tourism reports that commercial attraction visitation during 1999 was 17,337,682. During the same time period 26,820,448 people visited national parks, battlefields and recreation areas with the top venues being Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Cherokee National Forest. Tourism is one of the most important industries in our state and we are fortunate to have both Federal and privately owned top-notch attractions to bring visitors and revenues to Tennessee.

Tennessee State Parks had greater visitation than either private or Federal tourist attractions. During Fiscal Year 1999-2000, 31,833,942 people visited State Parks. State Parks visitation was almost double the visitation of commercial attractions and was 18.7% higher than Federal attractions. This is conclusive proof that State Parks are the number one tourism draw for Tennessee. We are killing the golden goose of tourism.

Nature or ecotourism is the fastest growing segment of the world's largest industry: tourism. National trends in nature tourism indicate large increases in outdoor recreation activities during the past 20 years:

- Birding +155.2%
- Hiking +93.5%
- Backpacking +72.2%
- Primitive camping +58.2%
- Walking +42.8%
- Sightseeing +39.5%
- Camping +38.3%

These are all environmentally sustainable activities that require something that only government can typically provide: large tracts of pristine natural habitat with public access. Golf, even though a rapidly growing recreational past time, is not even close in growth statistics to the above low impact activities that thrive on the non-capital intensive venues of our non-resort parks.

Legislators and the Administration are looking at State Parks from an expense perspective. Parks are seen as needing to pay their own way, a difficult prospect for properties without significant income producing infrastructure. Even huge capital investments in resort parks have not generated sufficient income to operate profitably, and even if operated with the highest efficiencies of their commercial counterparts, the revenue can never financially support the rest of the system. During Fiscal Year 1999-2000, occupancy at resort park hotels and parks with cabins averages less than 50%. Commercial operations, which are operated more efficiently, cannot make a profit with 50% occupancy.

If each of the 32 million visitors spends only \$30 on food, gear, lodging or fuel as a result of their nature tourism activities, nature tourism at State Parks contributes almost \$960 million to our local

and state economy. A good urban parallel is the operation of municipal convention centers, almost none of which operate at a profit, but all of which create significant tourism and trade income for their urban communities.

For more information on nature tourism statistics and surveys, visit www.fermatainc.com. What you will see there is that the majority of visitors come to enjoy the sights, sounds and smells of Nature. The vast majority is not coming to eat at resort park restaurants or stay in park hotels.

During 1989, the U. S. Forest Service and the University of Georgia conducted a federally funded economic impact analysis study at Frozen Head. The results of the study: visitors to Frozen Head added \$5 million per year in economic activity to local and state government. Visitation last year at Frozen Head was 241,255, an increase of more than 50% since 1989. Visitation this year is reported at over 210,000 through August, on track to total over 300,000 for the year. Frozen Head's local economic impact is in the range of \$11 million in 2001, an average of about \$36 per visitor, which is typical of the studies that have been conducted around the country. Frozen Head is being closed.

The 14 state parks that are being closed, including Frozen Head, had visitation during the 1999-2000 fiscal year of 3,578,031, or 11.23% of all state parks. Using the conservative figure of \$30 in expenditures for visitors, without the 1.5 to 2.5 economic activity multiplier normally used by expert analysts, economic activity in the state will be reduced by over \$107 million annually. Multiplied times the 8% sales tax, the loss in revenue to the state will be over \$8.5 million. Even if the tax revenue loss is only half that amount, it still far exceeds the \$3.5 million guesstimated savings from closing 14 parks. The actual tax revenue is more likely in the range of \$14 to \$18 million.

Why don't State Parks Division management and the General Assembly realize this? Because State Parks say they don't have the money to do the analysis. TDEC Assistant Commissioner Rick Sinclair and Director Williams both said so in May of this year.

What About Solutions?

There are no simple solutions to the problems with State Parks. We have invested hundreds of millions of dollars over 65 years to get to where we are today. The apparent choice of the current Administration is to maintain the status quo, making short-term closures and expense reductions until the General Assembly appropriates more funds and/or the economy improves. This is akin to taking aspirin for a brain tumor.

In May 2001, Commissioner Hamilton proposed the Administration's enterprise bill, The State Resort Parks Management Enterprise Act of 2001, Senate Bill 581 and House Bill 840. The bill proposed a restructuring of state resort parks "so that they operate like a business". Based on that simple statement, one might assume that state resort parks have not been operated like a business up to this point. Careful analysis of the facts might lead you to conclude that this is quite true. But there is nothing in state law preventing them from being well managed. They don't need approval of the General Assembly. Good management is up to the managers.

The enterprise bill wanted freedom to conduct retail operations (resort parks) under a new and independent Tennessee Resort Park Operations Enterprise, governed by a politically appointed board, managed by the same managers who are supposed to be managing Parks now: the Commissioner of TDEC, the Commissioner of Finance and Administration, the Assistant Commissioner of TDEC over State Parks and the Comptroller of the Treasury. The bill specified exemption from State purchasing procedures, an opportunity to exempt resort park employees from the civil service system, and the disposition of revenue from resort parks into a special account within the General Fund that "may be expended for the benefit of resort park operations or for any state park operations".

This was the Administration's best effort at solving our State Park problems. This author was present in the House Committee on Environment and Conservation meetings in May and personally witnessed the energy and passion Commissioner Hamilton expended to get this bill approved. The testimony of Linda McCarty from the Tennessee State Employees' Association was responsible for killing the bill. The bill died in the House Committee and is supposed to be studied during the month of September 2001 for possible reconsideration next year.

At the same time, the Administration was very much opposed to a Sierra Club bill, House Bill 556 and Senate Bill 735, The State Parks Management and Preservation Act of 2001. This bill would create an administrative board consisting of the Commissioner of TDEC, 13 citizen representatives – 9 appointed by the Governor, one from each Congressional District in the State of whom five would have specific background and education appropriate to parks management. In addition, one member would be appointed by the Speaker of the House and one by the Speaker of the Senate, one from Tennessee Recreation and Parks Association and one from the Tennessee Environmental Council, both selected by the Governor. This citizen board would be empowered to hire and direct a professional, educated and credentialed Executive Director of State Parks, approve the park budget, establish management objectives and formulate the State Parks Master Plan. This new agency would be independent of TDEC. The projected financial impact of this proposed bill would increase state expenditures by less than \$100,000. This bill also died in the House committee. The Enterprise Bill was so controversial that HB556/SB735 was never discussed before the Committee. It is also scheduled for a September 2001 study session.

If we are to help State Parks, we should stop assuming that simple solutions preserving the status quo will solve our problems. They will not. They cannot. Every park employee in the field who was interviewed emphasized this point. Most believe things cannot get any worse than they are, but all fear that they will. Many mismanaged private businesses have suffered a similar fate – no plan or a plan gone wrong, mismanagement, too many expenses and not enough revenue. These businesses either close, sell out, go into bankruptcy or reorganize. State Parks are already closing. Will we next sell out or go into bankruptcy? Or, will we reorganize? If we do reorganize, will we trust the "crown jewels of this state," to use Commissioner Hamilton's words, to the same crew and captains in Nashville who have run our ship aground? The captain of the Exxon Valdez isn't driving oil tankers any longer, is he?

The blame for our problems doesn't belong just to Governor Sundquist, Commissioner Hamilton or Director Williams. They have inherited much of what is wrong with State Parks. But the blame for not making efforts to fix the problems does belong to these gentlemen, and to all of their predecessors who kept on keeping on with a system that defies the intent of the Act of 1937, a system that has not healed itself because unqualified political appointees have prevailed over the appointment, selection or promotion of professional leadership. They are responsible for revolving door management turnover. And, these gentlemen are responsible for creating and tolerating a work environment where dissenting ideas result in retribution, and where ideas in the field are thus not even heard, let alone considered. If this were not so, the contributors to the information in this story would have been proud to have their names beside their quotes and opinions. Not in this Administration.

The solution to our State Parks problems must come from the people – taxpayers, citizens, and voters. State government can only do what we permit it to do, as evidenced by the defeat of the state income tax. Do we need tax reform? Yes, undoubtedly. Do we need tax reform without government reform? No, undoubtedly. And to the point of this story, do we need State Parks reform? Yes, undoubtedly. But, making that happen is up to us.

Part of the process of analyzing reform or reorganization of State Parks is getting truthful, accurate and meaningful information. Here are some of the questions that you might ask of the Administration or your Legislators to help begin this task:

1. How much money has State Parks spent on capital improvements in the past 10 years? Show me the feasibility studies, risk analysis studies and return on investment analyses that demonstrate that sound business judgment was used in making these decisions. If state government really wants to run Parks like a business, this information should be readily forthcoming. They don't need a new law to run Parks like a business.
2. What are the costs of construction and operation costs of conference and convention centers at State Parks? Provide the operating expenses and revenue that demonstrate an adequate return on investment to justify these projects and facilities.
3. Are the operators of the Bear Trace golf courses making money? Are they making their bond payments? Do we need more golf courses at State Parks?
4. Which parks have received Land and Water Conservation Fund monies? How much did each receive? How will the state repay the Federal Government if these parks are closed? How was this information used to determine which parks are closing now?
5. How can you operate resort parks as a business if you do not use generally accepted accounting principles? How are overhead expenses applied to these operations? Why do some operations have low overhead percentages while others have high overhead percentages? How were the decisions regarding these allocations made? Who made the final determination?
6. Why don't resort parks expenses include capital depreciation and maintenance like commercial hotels and restaurants? If you want to run these parks like a business, shouldn't these expenses be accountable like the private commercial tax paying enterprises you are competing against?
7. What are the specific projected line item expenses that would be saved by implementing the Enterprise Act? Show me the before and after accounting estimates of these savings. This analysis should have been done before the bill was proposed and should be immediately available.
8. Why are we opening a new \$14 million resort park hotel in 2001 when we are trying to save \$3.5 million by terminating 184 employees, closing 14 parks and closing all other parks two days per week in 2001? Who made the decision to build a hotel where a hotel is already located? When was the decision made? Why did you make this decision? Show us the analysis that justifies this investment through anticipated revenues that will repay the debt that taxpayers must repay. What are you going to do with the old hotel? When did you make the decision regarding what you are going to do with the old hotel? What are the economic justifications for this disposition?
9. Why are field personnel expendable in the current park closings but Nashville personnel are not? Why did you dismiss two senior employees while newly hired executive status employees without experience are being retained? How were these decisions made? Who made them?
10. Why does State Parks Division have a dozen or more marketing personnel and also employ the services of a marketing consulting firm? What do the personnel cost? What does the consultant cost? If we are closing resort parks on a seasonal basis, do we still need these people and these services? Shouldn't some of them be laid off?

The questions could go on forever.

Leadership and vision – these are the essential requirements of any successful endeavor. Tennessee State Parks were founded with a vision. Since the departure of the first director, Parks have never had professional leadership. During the same year that Tennessee State Parks were enacted, at Norris Dam in 1937 at the 7th National Conference on State Parks, Colonel Richard Lieber of Indiana spoke these words:

“State parks should be the show windows of the state. But more than that, state parks are a dedication of the soul of the land. Without vision, the land would die. Without inspiration, we remain disconnected from the immortal order of things. Our state parks preserve the sources of our inspiration. State parks are a power for elevating the spirit. Their standards should be higher than the average visitor's mental or physical

requirements. Their purpose is not merely to satisfy but to uplift. Speaking for myself, I would not at all be interested in the work if the function of parks and recreation would merely be to provide shallow amusement for bored and boring people. Folks so disposed should be referred to bingo or any other of the abounding inanities.”

To paraphrase President Theodore Roosevelt from his national parks speech in 1907: Here, Tennesseans, are your parks. Do not let anyone take them or their glory away from us. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin our parks of their bounty, their beauty, their riches, or their romance. The state and the future and your very children shall judge us according to the way we deal with this sacred trust.

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Ron Castle is a member of the Sierra Club, a freelance writer, photographer and web programmer. His views are solely his own, speaking as a taxpaying citizen of the great state of Tennessee and a lover of State Parks.

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