



DELAWARE STATE PARKS

STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026



Prepared by:

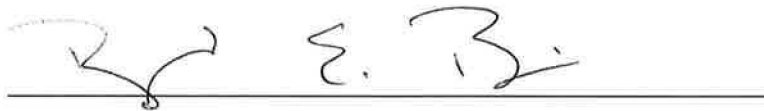
The State of Delaware

Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control

Division of Parks and Recreation

Approval of Delaware State Parks 2021-2026 Strategic Plan

Approved this 9th day of March 2021.



Raymond E. Bivens, Director

The State of Delaware

Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control

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**DELAWARE
STATE PARKS**



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STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

Executive Summary

The 2021-2026 Strategic Plan is a framework to guide Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control's Division of Parks and Recreation core priorities and goals. This document will ensure Delaware State Parks remains an award-winning system providing quality experiences and services to millions of visitors while leading the charge in natural and cultural resource management. The plan was created through gathering input from staff of all locations and positions.

The strategic priorities aim to offer a shared vision throughout all positions and sections of the Division and set forth a visionary document to guide decision-making and policy development that is critical to the success of the park system. The Division recognizes that staff, volunteers, and partners are the backbone of Delaware's state parks and critical in providing support and professional experience related to the state's most valuable natural and cultural resources. The Division also recognizes the unique resources in its charge, including Delaware's only accredited zoo and some of the most scenic and historically significant sites in Delaware.

PRIORITIES

- Provide high-quality, safe, inclusive, and accessible recreational experiences
- Build a deep connection and understanding of our natural and cultural resources
- Continue to build excellence in our workforce
- Strengthen our outreach and partnerships
- Assure long-term fiscal stability and improved efforts to reduce our capital backlog

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AT A GLANCE



Delaware State Parks at a Glance

DNREC's Division of Parks and Recreation is a National Association of Recreation and Parks Gold Medal Award-winning park system. With seventeen state parks and several preserves and attractions, including marinas, golf courses, and Delaware's only Association of Zoos and Aquariums accredited zoo, Delaware State Parks has something for everyone. Our parks host over six million visitors annually, providing safe recreational opportunities while protecting the natural and cultural resources that have shaped the park system and the state as a whole. The Division presently manages nearly 160 miles of trails, 18 miles of ocean and Delaware Bay beaches, 41 miles of roads, more historic structures than any in the state, and over 26,000 acres of land and water.

DEPARTMENT MISSION

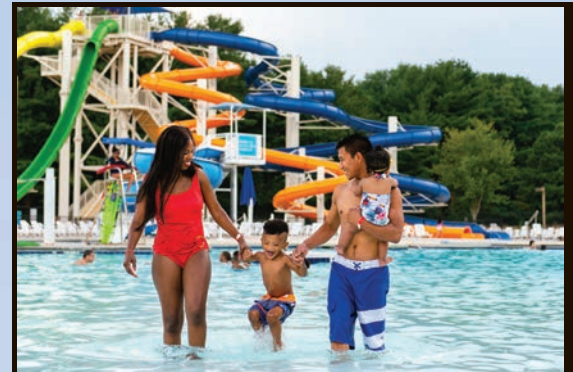
The mission of DNREC is to engage all stakeholders to ensure the wise management, conservation and enhancement of the state's natural resources; protect public health and the environment; provide quality outdoor recreation; improve the quality of life; lead energy policy and climate preparedness; and educate the public on historic, cultural and natural resource use, requirements and issues.

DEPARTMENT VISION

The Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) envisions a Delaware that offers a healthy environment where people embrace a commitment to the protection, enhancement and enjoyment of the environment in their daily lives; where Delawareans' stewardship of natural resources ensures the sustainability of these resources for the appreciation and enjoyment of future generations; and where people recognize that a healthy environment and a strong economy support one another.

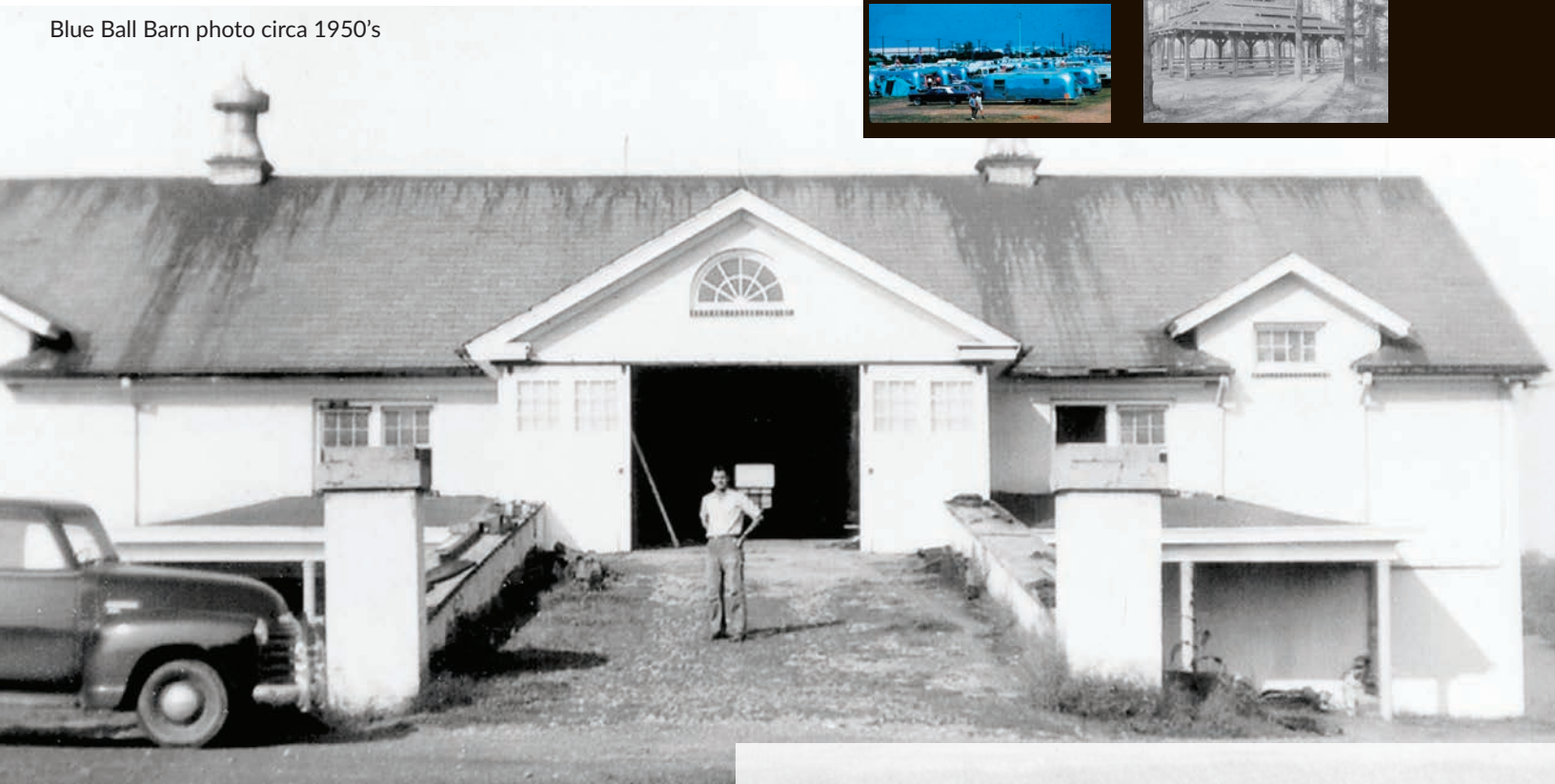
DIVISION MISSION

To provide Delaware's residents and visitors with safe and enjoyable recreational opportunities and open spaces, responsible stewardship of the lands and the cultural and natural resources that we have been entrusted to protect and manage, and resource-based interpretive and educational services.



HISTORY

Blue Ball Barn photo circa 1950's



As the country's population and interest in outdoor recreation grew, the State Park Commission sought a way to provide more opportunities for Delaware's citizens.

Completion of work on the Blue Ball Barn 2007



The Story of Delaware State Parks

In 1682, Edmond Warner of Lewes, Delaware was given a written proclamation known today as the Warner Land Grant. At the time, Delaware was part of William Penn's colony of Pennsylvania, and Penn granted Warner certain conditions of the land's use, allowing local residents to gather oysters. This became the first documented open land being set aside for use by the people of Delaware. The land specified in the Warner Grant makes up a portion of today's Cape Henlopen State Park.

With the Warner Grant opening the door to public access to land, Delaware's Game and Fish Commission (now Division of Fish and Wildlife), the State Highway Department, and the State Forestry Department all operated recreation areas around the state—some of which are now in state parks. The focus was largely on managing fish and wildlife, maintaining basic infrastructure like roads, and establishing and enforcing regulations.

It wasn't until 1937 that the Delaware General Assembly created the State Park Commission, charged "to preserve and protect the scenic, historic, scientific, prehistoric, and wildlife resources of the State, and to make them available for public use and enjoyment."

In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) worked on land around Trap Pond that was purchased through the Rural Resettlement Administration. The program built pavilions, a dam, and a Park headquarters office; many of these structures still stand in the park today. The land at Trap Pond was transferred to the State Park Commission in 1950, creating Delaware's first state park in 1951. One year later, a second park was added after Fort Delaware on Pea Patch Island was returned to the state, having been deemed surplus by the War Department.

As the country's population and interest in outdoor recreation grew, the State Park Commission sought a way to provide more opportunities for Delaware's citizens. In 1965, they implemented a plan they called Project 80, with the goal of having ten state parks by 1980. By 1980, they had surpassed their goal, with a total of fourteen state parks and smaller nature preserves.

The 1970s brought organizational changes that continue through the present day; the State Park Commission became the Division of Parks and Recreation within the newly formed Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC).

Today, the division manages a variety of parks, including seventeen state parks, as well as nature preserves, greenways, a zoo, and golf courses. Our parks provide recreational and educational experiences for visitors to explore diverse environments and the many chapters of Delaware's proud history.



CELEBRATE



Delaware State Parks celebrates continued excellence in land preservation, natural and cultural resource management and recreational opportunities.



Project 75

In 2026, the Division will celebrate its 75th anniversary which began with the dedication of Trap Pond State Park in 1951. In honor of this accomplishment, the Division will kickoff the Project 75 campaign with the goal of continued excellence in land preservation, natural and cultural resource management, and recreational opportunities.

OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS...

- 75,000 trees planted in parks
- 750 acres of new park land, conservation easements or nature preserves protected
- 75 new/improved campsites, cabins, cottages, or yurts
- 75 new accessible amenities, including boat ramps, hunting stands, hay wagons, pavilions, campsites, etc.
- \$7.5 million in grants and partnership funding to support free park-based field trips, community recreational improvements and cultural/natural resource stewardship efforts statewide.
- \$75,000 in grants and partnership funding to support internships in natural and cultural resources
- \$7,500,000 annual investment toward addressing capital backlog and improvements



Top Notch Recreation



GOAL: Provide high-quality, safe, inclusive, and accessible recreational experiences through the careful alignment of the opportunities available within the landscapes and natural and cultural resources unique to our parks.

The Division prides itself on providing high-quality recreation experiences for users of all abilities to better connect with the essential experiences in each park. In addition to traditional park recreational activities such as biking, hiking, birding, and camping, the Division is also home to golf courses, marinas, and Delaware's only AZA-accredited zoo. As the coordinator of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan and the Outdoor Recreation and Pathway Trails grant program, the Division has recreational impacts far beyond the boundary of state parklands.





STRATEGIES:

Connections to healthy living and life-long programming

1. Develop new programs addressing social stories, natural resource management, environmental challenges, and cultural resource management that align with the park's essential experiences and themes.
2. Develop partnerships with outside professionals to provide free workshops on activities the Division offers, such as pickleball, disc golf, fly fishing, surf fishing, and campfire cooking.
3. Partner with all DNREC Divisions to help deliver critical mission-based messaging to visitors statewide. Work closely with DNREC's Division of Fish and Wildlife to reach a broader audience for hunter education and fishing programs statewide.
4. Continue to support the Children in Nature initiative. Provide and promote programs that engage people of all abilities through purposeful planning of trails, interpretation, and recreational amenities that connect the public with each park's essential experiences.

Visitor and Resource Balance

1. Assure investments in recreation are compatible with our resources and specific park settings. Make investments that complement rather than compete with neighboring municipal and county park systems.
2. Create a working group to establish meaningful and sincere efforts to ensure staff and visitors feel safe, welcomed and valued.
3. Evaluate areas of heavy use and days of high visitation for options that reduce the impact of both through thoughtful infrastructure design, administrative strategies, and marketing of "off-peak" visitation.

Campground/Cabins Statewide

1. Conduct a thorough statewide planning effort to evaluate site improvements and to incorporate best practices and industry standards to our campgrounds. Review existing surveys to identify visitor needs and trends to better inform future amenity and campground planning.
2. Evaluate opportunities for camping expansion within existing campgrounds, to include site upgrades, additional tent camping locations, various cabin opportunities, and new campground locations.

Natural Resources Police

1. Develop a unified training program across DNREC Natural Resource Police to ensure all rangers exceed training standards. Expand training of Park Patrol Officers to enforce and expand automated fee opportunities.
2. Continue to build strong relationships with user groups, neighbors sharing park boundaries, and surrounding communities for outreach.
3. Broaden enforcement outreach and coverage by working across DNREC, hiring reserve rangers, and marketing and promoting the work performed statewide for the safety and education of visitors.
4. Continue to act as one department with Natural Resource Police to provide safe and educational opportunities for all visitors while providing exceptional protection of natural and cultural resources.



A Deep Connection of Resources



GOAL: Build a deep connection and understanding of our natural and cultural resources through collaboration among staff, partners, organizations, and individuals to preserve and enhance our natural and cultural resources.

Cultural and natural resources are the keystone of our park system. The Division prides itself on efforts to protect and preserve the critical habitats, systems, and historic sites statewide. Efforts in this direction continue to grow annually, with a dedicated stewardship fund, expansion of programs such as the Veterans Corps, Internship, and Youth Conservation Corps initiatives, programs such as Time Travelers, special funding for historic sites, and a historic masonry apprenticeship program. There continues to be additional attention paid and resources provided for collection management, invasive species and deer management, and adaptive re-use of historic sites.





STRATEGIES:

Natural Resources

1. Develop a strong partnership between state park staff, other DNREC Divisions, volunteers and external organizations to assist with critical stewardship messaging, including environmental literacy, invasive species control, deer management, and climate change.
2. Continue to expand the state park deer hunting program to reduce the impact of overabundant deer on native plant communities and the species that depend upon them.
3. Update resource management plans for each park.
4. Work with DNREC's Division of Climate, Coastal and Energy to expand Delaware's efforts on climate change, as outlined in the Delaware Climate Action Plan.

Cultural Resources

1. Create a comprehensive approach to inventorying and managing resources, and provide training for park staff to collect and utilize inventory. Conduct a statewide condition assessment for buildings, and prioritize renovation needs. Seek out partnerships and enhanced training for staff on cultural and historical program interpretation.
2. Evaluate buildings for adaptive reuse, curatorship, and areas deemed critical and high-priority.
3. Develop a three-pronged training program to address maintenance and care of historic structures, to include site-specific staff training on routine maintenance, volunteer training for non-specialized projects, and advanced training in historic trades.
4. Develop a cultural resources disaster preparedness plan.

Brandywine Zoo

1. Strive to exceed modern zoological practices through exceptional animal care and services to maintain AZA accreditation.
2. Work with the Delaware Zoological Society to successfully launch and raise funds for the new flamingo exhibit and entryway. Include a rebranding of the zoo with planning, signage, and color palettes.
3. Complete the quarantine and animal care facility. Continue to upgrade existing infrastructure and animal holding areas, working closely within historic structure guidelines.
4. Expand conservation efforts with an urban wildlife monitoring program, developing a citizen science program, and developing human-urban wildlife coexistence programming and partnerships. Expand the American Kestrel monitoring program. Expand Madagascar conservation efforts through Conservation Fusion and the Madagascar Biodiversity Partnership to establish our international presence.
5. Broaden inclusive programming for diverse audiences (including local hospital outreach, sensory hours, family programs, etc.).
6. Expand visitor experiences with improved behind-the-scene programs, animal encounters, nature play programs, docent-led programming, etc.
7. Take advantage of the increase in virtual training opportunities to increase staff competencies, including the AZA National and mid-year conferences, Animal Welfare Workshop and others.



Excellence in Workforce



GOAL: Continue to build excellence in the Division's workforce through the recruitment and retention of a diverse, qualified and motivated staff.

The Division's success is largely due to the qualified and passionate staff that work tirelessly every day to ensure that every park visitor walks away with a positive, safe and memorable experience. This does not happen without a strong push to recruit, retain, and train quality staff for all positions. Currently, during peak operating times, over 75% of the Division's staff are employed in a casual/seasonal capacity. Training and creating quality work experiences are critical to future staff development and promotion.

Like most park and recreation organizations, including the National Park Service, diversity continues to be a challenge. The Division feels strongly that the workforce must reflect the communities it serves and is aiming to take strides to improve diversity statewide.





STRATEGIES:

Diversity

1. Work with DNREC's Environmental Justice efforts to evaluate on-the-job work programs offering varying job assignments to gain experiences and skills to foster interest in a parks and recreation career.
2. Provide outside training on diversity and inclusion for staff. Partner with colleges, universities and high schools, strengthen partnerships with organizations like Junior Achievement, and develop an endowment for internships.
3. Engage youth and provide opportunities for careers in parks through increased marketing of the YCC and Veterans Corp Program and connecting the opportunities with next steps in career advancement in Parks.

Retention/Recruitment

1. Establish recruitment, on-boarding, and retention plans, working directly with Human Resources.
2. Work to enhance recruitment efforts that focus on improving diversity among applicants.
3. Evaluate, explore, and share benefits of state and park employment including a commitment to expand training for all staff through internal opportunities and external training through professional organizations.
4. Develop marketing strategies to build awareness of careers in Parks to the millions of annual park visitors.

Communications

1. Work closely with staff in all positions to ensure that open communication and messaging is being shared.
2. Expand and update IT opportunities to streamline communication through the use of technology and virtual meetings.

Training

1. Conduct a needs assessment to evaluate and identify common skills and to plan for appropriate training for each position.
2. Improve communication to staff on available training opportunities, especially virtual training. Invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion training, as well as sign language and conversational Spanish.
3. Expand training for all staff through internal opportunities and external training through professional organizations within the industry, such as National Association of State Parks Directors, National Recreation and Park Association, Indiana University Executive Development Program, and National Association of Interpretation.
4. Provide internal mentoring and shadowing experiences to staff who are interested, including inviting them to meetings they might not otherwise have an opportunity to attend.



Partnerships



GOAL: Strengthen our outreach and partnerships to provide services to visitors and reduce staff requirements.

The Division depends heavily on businesses, organizations and individuals who show their love of Delaware State parks through various levels of support. We work closely to develop strong public-private partnerships that further the Division's mission and improve visitor experiences. Twenty businesses currently serve as concessionaires, providing park visitors with food and restaurant services, adventure sports experiences, equipment rentals, and special events.

Volunteers representing corporate groups and non-profits, as well as interested individuals come to our parks to give back and build memories for visitors to come. More than 3,500 volunteers contribute almost 141,238 hours annually, equating to about 72 full-time employees. The Division also has fifteen Friends groups that actively support Delaware State Parks. These groups are independent, nonprofit organizations whose members are dedicated to assisting a particular park; they provide assistance with special events and programs, perform park maintenance, fundraise, staff nature centers, and advocate for the parks.



STRATEGIES:

Public/Private Partnerships – Concessionaires

1. Package and market opportunities to attract partners with good business plans that compliment and enhance visitor experiences and align with our mission.
2. Invest in properties needing additional support by developing a plan to target facilities that are underutilized or in need of adaptive re-use.

Public/Private Partnerships – Community Organizations

1. Build grassroots support by fostering relationships and enhancing communication, with a focus on environmental justice efforts.
2. Communicate and emphasize the importance of these partnerships and the needs these partnerships fulfill.
3. Expand out to universities and colleges to promote intern opportunities within our organization. This will provide additional resources and potential future employees with experience.

Friends Groups and Volunteers

1. Implement best management practices for non-profits adopted by each state park's Friends group, including agreements, auditing, and annual plans.
2. Support, strengthen and develop Friends groups statewide through close relationships between each group, the park staff, and the Central Office liaison to maximize the effectiveness of the group.
3. Continue to enhance relationships with volunteer partners to better assist with labor and fundraising needs of each park.
4. Evaluate training opportunities for volunteers and Friends to broaden their experiences and potential impact.



We work closely to develop strong public-private partnerships to further the Division's mission and improve visitor experiences



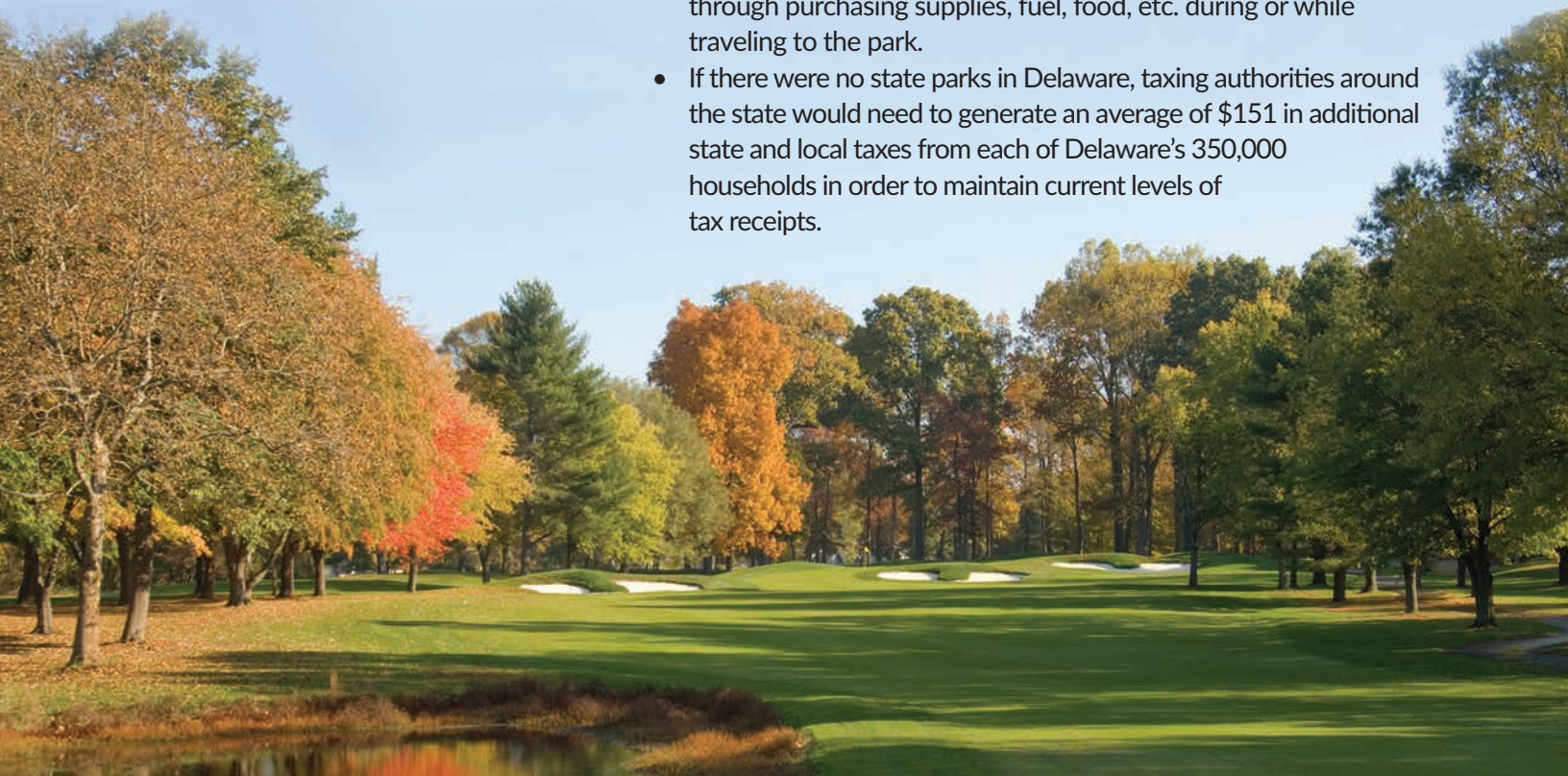
Long-term Fiscal/Capital Improvement



GOAL: Assure long-term fiscal stability and improved efforts to reduce the Division's capital backlog through strategic investments utilizing public funding and innovative revenue generation opportunities.

An Economic Impact Study completed in 2018 showed that every general fund operating dollar invested in state parks resulted in \$40.02 in economic activity to the State of Delaware. This is more than double the valued amount of surrounding state park systems.

- Delaware's state park system supports nearly 6,700 full- and part-time jobs across Delaware through staffing at the parks, concessionaires, support facilities, hotels, construction projects and other activities supported while visiting parks.
- Park visitors spent \$398 million in Delaware, an average of \$245 per visitor.
- Nearly \$53 million in state and local taxes were initiated by Delaware's state park system, including \$6.6 million in gross receipts tax, \$1.5 million in hotel taxes, \$4.7 million in income taxes, and \$9.5 million in property taxes.
- Visitors to Delaware's five state park campgrounds spend \$318.9 million, or 82% of the total economic impact of the state park system while camping or associated with their trip through purchasing supplies, fuel, food, etc. during or while traveling to the park.
- If there were no state parks in Delaware, taxing authorities around the state would need to generate an average of \$151 in additional state and local taxes from each of Delaware's 350,000 households in order to maintain current levels of tax receipts.





DNREC's Division of Parks and Recreation has an operating budget that is 65% self-funded, which is unique within Delaware government. Capital expenses come from the Bond Bill; user fees; federal grants; Community Transportation Funds; public and private partnerships; grants and donations; and loans.



The Division has a \$120 million capital backlog on projects such as pier and dock repairs, sewer plant/septic system replacements, resurfacing and paving parking lots, amenity upgrades and bathroom improvements.

STRATEGIES:

Business Operations

1. Evaluate under-utilized activities with revenue potential, and develop marketing plans to maximize growth.
2. Evaluate statewide strategies by park to streamline operations and reduce expenditures. Determine if any existing visitor service offerings would be best served through a concessionaire, thereby expanding offerings and reducing staff demands.
3. Expand on Department-wide opportunities such as Electronic Content Management to improve accessibility and organization for staff.

Capital Project and Maintenance Management

1. Expand the use of the Annual Park Priority Plan as a tool to identify capital projects and maintenance management efforts.
2. Optimize planning and construction by building utility layers in GIS to assist with planning projects and streamlining contracting processes.



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