

Why Has Governor Knowles Closed State Parks?

By Loren Leman, Senate Majority Leader

“Parks Closed Due to Legislative Budget Cuts” – Alaskans were surprised to see those signs posted at some state parks in late May. We wanted to know why Governor Knowles posted certain state parks closed Memorial Day weekend. I am the Chairman of the Senate Finance Subcommittee which reviews the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) budget. I believe we worked cooperatively and well with Commissioner of DNR Pat Pourchot to accomplish a budget for DNR that supports the number one income-producing division in the state, the Division of Oil and Gas, and provides for forestry, parks, archaeology, and geophysical/geological work.

Because we were already in Juneau for a special session at the request of the Governor, I scheduled a hearing on why the Administration chose to close state parks.

After our hearings and our discussions with the Commissioner, I’m still asking – why Governor Knowles chose to close state parks when the Division of Parks has the funding it needs through June 30 to keep those parks open?

I’m still asking – why Governor Knowles did not simply begin the next fiscal year on July 1 and keep the parks open for as long as the money in the Fiscal Year 03 budget would allow? By doing this, Parks would have received an additional \$116,000 in revenue that it now will not have because the gates will go up.

Let’s be clear on the numbers – by closing these 11 parks, DNR has cost itself \$116,000 in operating funds. By the Commissioner’s testimony in a hearing on DNR, it would have cost \$197,000 to manage these parks for the same time frame – that’s an \$81,000 shortfall in a \$5,800,000 budget for Parks. We’re not asking the department to write a bad check. If the money isn’t in the bank by the time the parks are ready to be opened next spring blame the Legislature and ask for a supplemental. But don’t close parks today when there is clearly money to operate them.

DNR could have kept our parks open until it got to the point next March when it ran out of money and the parks had to be closed. But they didn’t do that. They chose to close parks with money in the bank.

The Governor may have wanted to make a political statement, but in the process, he has hurt park users and businesses in the Mat-Su area and in Fairbanks. He has not given the local governments time to respond to mitigate the closures. Not enough outreach has been done by Parks to identify nonprofits or private contractors who might be interested next year when and if the funding does run out in March 2003. At that point, DNR will have closed these parks for the winter and would not reopen them if the next Legislature doesn't appropriate supplemental operating funds.

Some people mistakenly believe that park receipts pay entirely for the operation of the parks. These receipts make up less than half of the Parks budget. The state's general fund and some federal funds make up the rest of this budget.

Alaska parks should be open. We've asked the questions we needed to ask to determine the reasons that they are closed. If the next Legislature doesn't act to put the funds in through the supplemental process and parks are closed in March 2003, the Legislature would be responsible. However, this Administration has greatly inconvenienced parks and boat launch users. I have asked Commissioner Pourchot to find a way to re-open these parks for Alaskans and their visitors. It can be done. It can be done this year. The money is in the bank.

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