

The politics of parks: More money isn't the answer

By **BYRON SCHLOMACH**

Politicians are amateurs when it comes to grass-roots politics. The real experts are bureaucrats.

Our 181 part-time Texas legislators make \$600 a month, stand for election every two to four years, and are scheduled to meet regularly only five months every other year.

State bureaucrats, on the other hand, number in the thousands. Their jobs are full-time and year-round. Many last thirty30 years. The number of legislators with thirty 30 years' experience can be counted with a few fingers on one hand.

A lesson in political acumen is being taught by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Parks and Wildlife has been particularly successful lately in rallying public support for more funding — even when the taxpaying and outdoorsy public really doesn't benefit.

For example, TPWDParks and Wildlife

itself once proposed that the 25-mile Texas State Railroad be sold. As tourist surveys are passed out at that facility, though, the Legislature is verbally blamed for threatening its existence. A bill in the last special session proposed almost a million dollars in new funding for the railroad. Now, Parks and Wildlife wants to keep the railroad but is asking for only \$650,000 to keep it open. The amount actually necessary may be far less, but only the department really knows. Right now, the railroad costs taxpayers well over \$1 million a year.

Parks and Wildlife has used the so-called sporting goods tax to fan the flames and rally proponents, claiming it is supposed to be getting almost \$70 million more per year in funding that it currently receives. But there is not truly a unique tax on sporting goods. The state gets about \$100 million per year from the sale of sporting goods due to the 6.25 percent sales tax that applies to most retail items.

Some years ago the Parks and Wildlife Department was partly funded by a dedicated tobacco tax that was shrinking. The Legislature changed the dedication but capped it because Parks and Wildlife's funding would have ballooned astronomically. Besides, such a total tax dedication would have made no more sense than the dedicated tobacco tax that preceded it. Only a tiny percentage of sporting goods sold in this state are ever used in state parks.

For the most part, the Parks and Wildlife Department 's lands are owned outright by the state, though there are some long-term leases from the federal government. The department pays no property taxes. While private hunting ranches and RV parks manage to pay taxes and make a profit, the department loses taxpayer money on the majority of its facilities without tax costs.

To be sure, there are some facilities, such as the San Jacinto Monument, Goliad and Enchanted Rock, that few Texans would argue should be self-sufficient. But what about Indian Lodge, a 39-room hotel built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression? The lodge has assigned to it 23 salaried and 10 hourly employees working 30 to 40 hours a week. No wonder it had to be financially propped up with \$90,000 in taxpayer funds in 2005. With labor costs like that, Marriott would be belly up in a week.

At the same time, how does McKinney Falls State Park — inside the Austin city limits — lose money? One way is that the historical house on the property is inaccessible unless visitors have a boat or are willing to get wet.

Our parks department does not do enough to promote the assets it has. A lot of beauty in many parks is inaccessible to anyone but the hardiest of backpackers. Further, it charges too little for those facilities in high demand. Parks and Wildlife should sell its lands in low demand and let the market make better use of the property. Often, the department fails to fully exploit existing facilities even as it seeks to create more. Indian Lodge could easily be privatized, to allow better use of taxpayer resources.

Texas Parks and Wildlife is a state-owned enterprise that is a drag on state finances, but only because it chooses to be. If a market-based, consumer-oriented approach were adopted, taxpayers, campers, tourists — and wildlife — would be better off.

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