



Indiana Parks Alliance

Protecting state parks & nature preserves

April 7, 2026

Honorable Mike Braun
Governor of Indiana
200 W. Washington St, Rm 206
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Dear Governor Braun,

The mission of the Indiana Parks Alliance (IPA) is to advocate for Indiana's state parks and state-owned nature preserves. While that includes promoting the benefits of these properties for their public recreation opportunities and access to nature, it also includes making government officials aware of their economic benefits, in addition to their obvious public health benefits.

Most properties of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources are located in rural areas of the state. This includes, of course, Indiana's state parks and state-owned nature preserves. Parts of our state parks are located in 39 of our 92 counties. They bring much needed jobs to these areas, both directly for the people employed on the properties, and indirectly by bringing visitors who support local businesses in those nearby communities.

During the 2024 fiscal year there were an estimated 18.2 million visits to our state parks. Of that total, approximately 3 million were out-of-state visitors, bringing money into our state to boost our economy. These numbers are based on state park entrance gate revenue, and therefore underestimate the totals, since these gatehouses are not staffed during periods of low visits.

Based on a Division of State Parks user survey conducted in late 2024 and early 2025, state park visitors spend between \$191 million and \$344 million dollars each year in nearby communities. This spending includes between \$32 million and \$58 million from outside the state of Indiana. This has a huge impact on local economies and can be used as the basis for growth of those economies.

Continuation of this economic impact is threatened by a lack of funding to maintain the very facilities that attract these visitors, and upon which they depend for an enjoyable experience that will encourage them to return. A comparison of funding for rehab and maintenance of state park facilities in 2008, when Mitch Daniels was governor and prior to the national economic recession, with funding provided today, shows a dramatic story. The 2023-25 budget (the last one with an identifiable construction budget) was only 32% of the inflation-adjusted budget for 2007-09. This is not sustainable.

Indiana Parks Alliance respectfully proposes that the 2027-29 budget include an economic development initiative for rural areas of the state, based on investment in public lands for outdoor recreation.

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This initiative would include:

1. Investments in state parks, including:
 - a. Funding for deferred maintenance to improve visitor experience and extend life of facilities
 - b. Improvements to campground facilities to better serve modern campers and increase revenue
 - c. Improvements to nature centers to better serve families and help connect kids with nature
 - d. Improvements to hiking trails, the most heavily used facilities in state parks.
2. Funding for Next Level Trails to help connect communities throughout Indiana
3. Improvements in access to state owned nature preserves where such access will not compromise preservation of the rare ecosystems which they protect. While their prime purpose is preservation of these natural areas, they are extremely popular with hikers who want a natural, less crowded experience.
4. Funding for purchase of additional natural areas to expand public hunting and fishing opportunities.

Part of this initiative should include embracing the reality that public lands need staff to manage them. This is true of developed lands, such as state parks, where staff are needed to maintain facilities and provide services that visitors expect, as well as natural lands, where staff are needed to manage invasive species and improve habitat for hunting and fishing opportunities. Lack of staffing at state park interpretive centers results in wasted opportunities to connect children with nature, denying them the recognized benefits for their development into well rounded adults capable of thriving in the modern world.

IPA believes that an economic development proposal such as this would be well received by conservationists, helping cement your legacy as a true conservation governor. The initiative would also be well received by residents of the rural areas where these properties are located. Many local tourism and chamber of commerce organizations have been very supportive of our past efforts to increase funding for the DNR properties near their communities, recognizing the economic benefits they bring.

We hope you will consider these suggestions for the upcoming budget cycle and will be happy to meet with you or your staff to discuss them in more detail. We have included several attachments, one showing how the statistics cited here were determined and a collection of photos documenting the results of lack of funding and staff to properly maintain park facilities.

Sincerely,



Milt Grissom
President
Indiana Parks Alliance

cc S. Jaworowski
A. Morrison



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VISITOR SPENDING STATISTICS

STATE PARK VISITOR SPENDING (Source: 2024-25 State Park visitor survey)

\$1-\$25	7%	More than \$100	20%
\$25-\$50	26%	Do not visit town	10%
\$50-\$100	30%	Visit town but spend no money	1%

ANNUAL STATE PARK VISITATION FOR FISCAL YEAR 2024 (Source: DNR)

Annual visitation of 18.2 million is an estimate based on park entrance and annual pass revenue and an assumption of 4 people per car. In the case of families, the person doing the survey would likely represent the entire car. Therefore, the annual visitation is divided by 4 to estimate community economic impact. This results in a conservative estimate. 18.2 million divided by 4 equals 4.6 million. It is estimated by DNR that 16.8% of those visitors are from out of state.

ESTIMATED ECONOMIC IMPACT

4,600,000 x .07 x \$1 =	\$.3 million
4,600,000 x .26 x \$25 =	\$29.9 million
4,600,000 x .30 x \$50 =	\$69 million
4,600,000 x .20 x \$100 =	\$92 million

Minimum estimated community spending \$191.2 million (use \$191 million)

4,600,000 x .07 x \$25 =	\$ 8.0 million
4,600,000 x .26 x \$50 =	\$ 59.8 million
4,600,000 x .30 x \$100 =	\$138 million
4,600,000 x .20 x \$150 =	\$138 million

Maximum estimated community spending \$343.8 million (use \$344 million)

Estimated community spending \$191-\$344 million

Community spending from out of state

Minimum	\$191 x .168 = \$32 million
Maximum	\$344 x .168 = \$58 million

Estimated community spending from out of state \$32-\$58 million



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STATE FUNDING STATISTICS

STATE PARKS PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE (PM) and CONSTRUCTION BUDGETS:

2007-09 VS. 2023-25 ¹ (Source: State Budget Agency website)

IPA believes the 2007-09 budget, approved under the Daniels administration before the great recession of 2008, was the last “sustainable” budget. Comparing the current budget with that budget shows:

2007-09 Constr./PM	Adjusted for inflation ²	2023-25 Constr./PM
\$36,310,000	\$53,287,000	\$16,820,000 ³

The 2023 Division of State Parks, PM and Construction budget is only **32%** of their inflation adjusted budget of 2007 (**\$16,820,000 vs. \$53,287,000**).

¹ 2025-27 construction budget was not itemized

² Adjusted for inflation to July 2023 using the CPI inflation calculator on the US Bureau of Labor Statistics website, www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

³ Excluding Potato Creek Inn



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EXAMPLES OF DETERIORATION OF FACILITIES AT INDIANA STATE PARK PROPERTIES

PHOTOS TAKEN 2025-2026



While this is an extreme example, many facilities are in need of roof replacements.



Uncut grass shows not just lack of maintenance, but also the condition of the playing surfaces.



Many picnic shelters have issues with rotted wood, and lack of staff and materials to properly repair them.



Downed trees and broken trail railings on the 850 miles of state park trails require staff time to maintain.



Broken railings on trails are not just unsightly, but also a safety issue.



While this is an extreme example of a trail eroding into an adjacent river, other trails are in danger of the same fate.