

STATE PARK AND FOREST RESERVATIONS

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House Bill 4041 (H-1) as reported from committee

Sponsor: Rep. Steven Johnson

Committee: Oversight

Complete to 12-20-22

Analysis available at
<http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

BRIEF SUMMARY: House Bill 4041 would amend the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act (NREPA) to require reservations for lodging or a picnic shelter at a state park or forest to first be made available to Michigan residents for two weeks before being made available to nonresidents.

FISCAL IMPACT: House Bill 4041 would not affect costs or revenues for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) or local units of government.

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Michigan has many state parks and state forests, most of which offer camping or other forms of lodging as well as shelters that can be reserved for group picnics. Some feel that at certain times of the year when demand for outdoor recreation is at its highest, it would appear that there are more visitors from out of state than from Michigan. Since in one sense a state park or forest belongs to the residents of that state, some believe that Michigan residents should have priority in making reservations. To address that concern, legislation has been offered that would require reservations for lodging, camping, or shelters to be made available to Michigan residents two weeks before being made available to people from other states or countries.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

House Bill 4041 would amend NREPA to require the DNR to give priority to Michigan residents for reservations at a state park or state forest before making those reservations available to nonresidents. This would apply to reservations at a campground, shelter (e.g., a picnic shelter), cabin, yurt, or lodge in a state park or a state forest. Under the bill, the DNR would have to make an opening available to residents for at least two weeks before the opening could be made available to nonresidents.

MCL 324.74114 and 324.83106

BACKGROUND:

The DNR's Parks and Recreation Division operates 70 campgrounds in state parks and 140 rustic campgrounds in state forests. A variety of lodging options, which include safari tents, cabins and minicabins, cottages, geodesic domes, and yurts, are also available at certain parks and forests.

In addition to nightly campsite or lodging fees, visitors must pay a fee for vehicle entry into a state park or state forest campground. Fees are not required for entry on foot or on bicycle.

Michigan residents can purchase a Recreation Passport for \$12 (or \$6 for a motorcycle) when getting or renewing their license plates via the secretary of state (SOS). The passport is valid

for one year or the period of the registration. Michigan residents also can purchase an annual Recreation Passport outside the vehicle registration process for \$17 (or \$11 for a motorcycle) at a state park, most DNR customer service centers, or an SOS office. In addition, a commercial daily pass (for vehicles that weigh 24,000 pounds or more or that seat 16 or more people) can be purchased at a state park for \$18. A separate Recreation Passport is required for any hitched or unhitched towed vehicle. A Recreation Passport is not required for school or public transit authority buses, for snowmobiles (although it is required for a vehicle trailering or carrying a snowmobile), or for vehicles registered in Michigan with a valid disabled veteran license plate, ex-prisoner of war plate, medal of honor plate, or Congressional Medal of Honor plate.

Nonresidents can pay \$10 for a daily pass (good for entry and re-entry for the day) or \$36 for an annual passport sticker valid for the calendar year. In addition, a nonresident must pay an additional \$7 for a towed motor vehicle (e.g., a car pulled behind an RV) if it will be used during their stay. (The towing vehicle also must have an annual nonresident pass.) In addition, the DNR offers to nonresidents a number of advance-sale passports for specific dates to enter the Warren Dunes State Park (the most popular Michigan state park) from mid-May to Labor Day. According to the DNR, the advance purchase for the daily pass works similarly to a “fast pass” option and was created to reduce traffic congestion on the Red Arrow Highway during the peak travel season. It does not guarantee a parking space inside the park, but helps reduce the number of people waiting in line to purchase a passport.

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The recent pandemic has spurred interest in outdoor recreation, and many parks and forests have seen increases in attendance. Last year alone saw a jump in state campground campsite bookings of almost 45% over 2020 (from 1.0 million in 2020 to 1.4 million in 2021). In 2022, many of the state’s most coveted summer weekends were already full by early March.¹ Currently, anyone can make a reservation to camp at a state park or forest up to six months ahead of time, and reservations for lodging or reserving a shelter in a state park or forest can be made up to a year in advance. The reservations are made on a “first come, first served” basis regardless of residence.

Some feel that, since the state’s resources belong to state taxpayers, Michigan residents should have first crack at landing a reservation for a time and place of their choice. The bill would address this concern by requiring that a reservation at any of the state’s parks or forests for camping, lodging, or shelters be available only to state residents for at least two weeks before being made available to nonresidents.

Against:

According to the DNR in its testimony before the committee, 89% of advance reservations are made by residents of Michigan. Only about 11% of overall advance reservations are made by nonresidents, with some parks noting as few as 4% of advance reservations by nonresidents. Parks and forests closer to bordering states may see a higher percentage of nonresidents, but Michiganders still make up the majority of those who make advance reservations. Moreover, many of the reservations made in the park system are made within 30 days of arrival, and about 3% are same day drive-ups.

¹ <https://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/2022/03/05/michigan-sate-park-camping-reservations/6981179001/>

In addition, the bill could hurt tourism and park revenue. Tourism is a big part of the Michigan economy. Those who stay in Michigan parks and forests also frequent local eateries, shops, and theaters. The bill could send a message that the state is not as welcoming to guests as to residents and adversely affect local businesses dependent on visitors. The park system is largely self-supporting through sales of Recreation Passports—to both residents and nonresidents. Since nonresidents pay a higher Recreation Passport fee, the bill also could reduce revenue for maintenance and improvements in the park system by discouraging nonresidents from choosing to visit or stay in a Michigan state park or forest.

The bill also may need clarification as to when the requirement to accept an advance reservation only from residents for two weeks would be triggered and when it would be satisfied. Would the requirement apply, on a rolling basis, only to the traditional opening of advance reservations six or 12 months, as applicable, before a planned stay? Or would it also apply to canceled reservations? For example, if a reservation were canceled at any time, would it be subject to a requirement that, for a period of two weeks from cancellation, those “newly” available dates could be offered only to Michigan residents?

POSITIONS:

A representative of the Department of Natural Resources testified in opposition to the bill.
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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House Fiscal Agency staff for use by House members in their deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.