



January 07, 2020

Thank you Chairman Mursau and members of the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Outdoor Recreation, for allowing me to testify in support of Assembly Bill 252 before you today. This legislation provides an exciting opportunity for 4th-grade students, as they learn about the state of Wisconsin in the classroom, to experience our state parks with their families.

By making available free vehicle admission stickers for the families of 4th-grade students, AB-252 allows families to experience and enjoy the 66 state parks of Wisconsin, along with state forests and other state recreational areas, while ensuring that future generations will maintain and continue to use these spaces for years to come. Wisconsin has a rich history of conservation and outdoor heritage, and our state's natural resources and environmental treasures are a cornerstone to our state's identity. The well-being of Wisconsin's natural resources relies on the education of our youth, and this bill proves to be a fantastic opportunity for students to experience our state's breathtaking landscapes and green spaces firsthand.

As it is the State Legislature's responsibility to create and preserve state parks and natural areas, we must also ensure that their legacy carries on into the future. By bringing our kids into our state parks we are planting seeds that will continue on the legacy of our public lands by teaching future generations how to preserve, conserve, and enjoy all that our shared resources have to offer.

Not only does this legislation provide an opportunity for children and families to experience and appreciate Wisconsin's state parks and instill education and awareness for future generations, but it is also key in creating economic stimulus and potential for our state. Families across Wisconsin are planning adventurous trips around the country when, in fact, there are so many great opportunities and adventure right here in our state. Being able to keep these families in Wisconsin, enjoying our state parks and natural areas and seeing what we have to offer in our own great state, is vital for our economy with people buying gas, spending money in local restaurants near the parks, camping, staying in hotels, visiting Main Street, and more. Additionally, allowing families to experience the great benefits of our state parks when their child is in 4th grade opens the door for further revenue from state parks admission passes for years down the line.

AB-252 introduces kids to outdoor recreation through creating accessibility and awareness of our state's natural treasures, while also providing economic benefits to our state and ensuring that future generations will carry on the legacy of our state parks for generations to come. I am proud to co-author this bipartisan legislation, and I thank you for your consideration.



JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony for the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation Assembly Bill 252 Tuesday, January 7, 2019

Thank you Chairman Mursau and committee members for holding a public hearing and allowing me to testify in support of Assembly Bill 252. By waving the annual vehicle admission fee for families of public or private school students in fourth grade, we will help introduce young people to the joys of outdoor activities and foster an appreciation of the beauty of our great state. We will promote an awareness of our state park system while, at the same time, boosting our local economies.

All of Wisconsin's state parks stand to benefit from this legislation, including the five state parks in my district in Door County. This bill will further encourage families to spend time together outdoors and experience our state parks, forests, recreational areas and trails.

By providing free vehicle admission stickers to these specific students, we will make it more feasible for families across Wisconsin to participate and enjoy our state parks. Through this bill, more of Wisconsin's residents will gain knowledge and appreciation for our state park system.

This legislation will also create a strong economic impact throughout our state. Not only does it encourage more people to attend state parks, it also brings revenue to businesses and communities surrounding our state parks.

As Wisconsin residents travel throughout the state to visit our 66 state parks, they will be spending money through lodging, dining, shopping and fuel. In addition to supporting local businesses, AB 252 helps to ensure that Wisconsin families stay in Wisconsin to experience the outdoors instead of traveling out of state.

By giving them the opportunity to visit Wisconsin's state parks through the waving of their entrance fee, we believe families will be more likely to purchase an admission sticker in the years to come, which will generate even more revenue for our state parks system. This is a great opportunity for children to get outside, away from their technology and learn to appreciate the unique parts of Wisconsin's lands.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony, and I hope you support this bipartisan bill. I would like thank the other authors of AB 252 – Rep. Sargent, Sen. Cowles and Sen. Smith – and their staff for all the hard work they put into this legislation. I am happy to answer any questions now if you have them.

Testimony on 2019 Assembly Bill 252

Senator Robert Cowles

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

January 7, 2019

Thank you, Chairman Mursau and committee members, for allowing me to testify on 2019 Assembly Bill 252. This bill requires the DNR to waive the fee for an annual vehicle admission sticker to the Wisconsin State Parks System issued to the parent or guardian of a Wisconsin student enrolled in fourth grade.

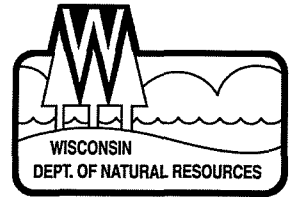
The Wisconsin State Park System consists of dozens of State Parks, Forests, Recreational Areas, and Trails, and represents the best of Wisconsin's pristine natural resources, abundance of wildlife, and prime recreational opportunities. Wisconsin has a strong history of land and water stewardship and outdoor recreation, becoming the first state to have a state park in 1878 when it formed The State Park in Vilas County. To date, our State Parks are visited by over 17 million people annually, but as the next generation increasingly spends more time indoors and less time outdoors, we need to focus on maintaining strong support for these natural treasures and responsible, but abundant use of our public lands.

Assembly Bill 252 waives the fee for an annual vehicle admission sticker to the Wisconsin State Parks System issued to the parent or guardian of a public or private school student enrolled in fourth grade. As elementary-schoolers start their civic education, this bill would provide these students and their caretakers with the incentive they need to get outside and experience some of our best public lands while spending time with family and building a lifelong respect for our natural resources. This annual sticker, normally \$28 for vehicles with Wisconsin plates, admits anyone inside the vehicle to State Parks and Forests.

Under Assembly Bill 252, the parent or guardian may only receive one waiver in his or her lifetime, and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) may issue a waiver only once per household. Further, the waived fee for the annual State Parks Sticker would only be issued if evidence is produced that a child is in fourth grade on January 1st of the issued pass's year. Finally, Assembly Bill 252 requires the DNR to provide an activity guide on its website for school-aged children related to State Parks, Forests, Recreational Areas, and Trails to further introduce youth to our state's natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities.

This bill mirrors the federal Every Kid in a Park program, and also reflects other statewide initiatives to get more kids outdoors. Kids are spending more time in front of screens and less time outdoors, contributing to a less physically and mentally healthy lifestyle and creating bad habits for the future. Assembly Bill 252 serves as a commitment to our state's youth by helping to engage with the next generation of State Park visitors and supporters while encouraging a healthier lifestyle for young Wisconsinites.

The Senate companion to AB 252, SB 212, has already received a unanimous recommendation from the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy as amended by Senate Amendment 1. This amendment provided technical clarifications to the legislation, largely at the request of the DNR. Some of the changes include: 1) ensuring home schooled students qualify; 2) providing a centralized process to request a pass, and; 3) listing what must be provided to the Department to redeem a pass.



Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

2019 Assembly Bill 252

Fee Waivers for State Park Vehicle Receipts to Pupils Enrolled in Grade 4 January 7, 2020

Good afternoon Chairman Mursau and members of the Committee. My name is Ben Bergey, and I am the Director of the Wisconsin State Parks and Recreation Program with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 252, which deals with fee waivers for state park vehicle admission receipts to students enrolled in 4th grade.

The Wisconsin State Park System sees more than 17.5 million visitors across more than 100 properties statewide. These visitors engage in a variety of recreational opportunities from camping and hiking to boating and picnicking. But a visit to a state park is more than a picnic or a camping trip; a visit to a state park is an opportunity for families to unite, learn about, and enjoy Wisconsin's great outdoors, and most important, to build traditions that create lifelong memories. The Wisconsin State Park System has a history of working with youth to provide opportunities to experience the outdoors. Most recently, the program is working with the Girl Scouts and 40 other states on the nation-wide Girl Scouts Love State Parks initiative. Additionally, a majority of our on-property programming and Wisconsin Explorer/Junior Ranger Program is geared toward school-aged children.

Under AB 252, the Department would be required to create a vehicle waiver system for all families with a 4th grader enrolled in public or private school on January 1 of the year for which the vehicle admission receipt is issued. In addition, the Department is to provide a visitor activity guide for state parks, forests, recreation areas, and trails on its internet site. Currently, the Wisconsin Explorer/Junior Ranger Program and the Wisconsin State Parks Visitor Guide are both available online.

Since it began in 2015, the Wisconsin State Parks Program has admired the National Parks Service's Every Kid in a Park initiative. This initiative, funded through their \$20-million youth engagement program budget, covers the entrance fees of families with 4th graders. In addition, that budget also provides transportation grants and educational materials to schools.

Should Wisconsin enact such legislation, the Department estimates a potential cost of \$254,000 annually to serve approximately 72,000 eligible 4th graders. This figure is based on estimates for the number of households with 4th graders potentially utilizing our state parks. This estimate includes loss of revenue on annual and daily admission sales and a cost to administer the program. The bill provides for a transfer from the state's general fund to offset the admission sales. Given that the Wisconsin State Parks are operationally self-funded, careful analysis of each decision affecting revenues must be considered, along with potential options.

For the past several years the Wisconsin State Park System has hosted Free Fun Weekend, waiving all entrance fees during the first full weekend in June. AB 252 would complement our OutWiGo program, which encourages individual and community health and wellness by getting people outdoors.

We also appreciate the bill authors' introduction of Assembly Amendment 1, which will help to ensure an efficient, cost-effective waiver delivery process. With this amendment, we believe that AB 252 will allow the Department to maintain a positive customer service experience for all visitors to our state parks by fulfilling admission sticker applications prior to customers visiting our state parks.

On behalf of the Parks and Recreation Management Bureau and the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.