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Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 415

Senator Robert Cowles

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

November 15th, 2023

Thank you, Committee Members, for allowing me to testify on 2023 Senate Bill 415. This bill would change the effective date of an Annual State Park pass from the calendar year to 12 months after the month of purchase.

There's no question that the State Park System is a tremendous asset to Wisconsin. Our state's 50 State Parks showcase some of the best natural features, beautiful scenery, and historic sites that Wisconsin has to offer. There are around 20 million visits to the Wisconsin State Park System annually, with some of those visits including camping or shelter reservations or in-park purchases, all of which provide the revenue for our State Parks to operate. This covers everything from summer LTE staffers at nature centers to basic maintenance and more.

One of the key sources of revenue for our State Park System is the purchase of annual stickers, which covers admission to State Parks and Forests for a vehicle and its occupants for a calendar year. These stickers, which are offered to residents for \$28, are a convenient way to avoid daily rates and the hassle in getting a daily pass, and the cost can be covered with just a few trips to a State Park each year. However, as many residents aren't frequenting a State Park System property in the colder months, many persons wait until late spring or even summer prior to purchasing an annual admission sticker, meaning up to half of their pass's life may be lost.

Further, as we get later into summer and fall, residents are disincentivized from buying an annual pass, knowing that it's useful life will be cut even shorter. This makes it more inconvenient for the State Park visitor as they will have to purchase another day pass if they want to go back that year and removes revenues that we could be getting from the user if they were instead to purchase an annual pass. 2022 data from the DNR supports this, as 36,000 passes were purchased in January to start the year, 61,000 and 56,000 passes were purchased in May and June, respectively, as we kicked-off the summer months, but only 12,000 and 6,000 passes were purchased in September and October, respectively, as we began moving closer to the end of the calendar year.

Senate Bill 415 is meant to eliminate this trend and ensure that annual passes are good for a full year after purchase, regardless of when they were purchased. Under the bill, a sticker would indicate the month it is issued, and would be good until the final day of the 12th month following the month in which it was purchased. That means if I were to buy my pass under this bill today, November 15th, 2023, it would be valid until November 30th, 2024. While I would get the benefit of a little more than a year, this saves substantial implementation hassles by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) not having to track the day of sale, just the month of sale.

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Design of the stickers would be up to the DNR, just as it is under current law, and implementation under this bill wouldn't take effect until January 1st, 2025, concurrent with the expiration of 2024 annual stickers valid for a calendar year. The 2024 stickers have already been designed and will be offered for sale starting shortly, so Senate Bill 415 wouldn't inhibit this ongoing process. Additionally, the delayed implementation will ensure the DNR has plenty of time to consider all of the appropriate factors included with this operational change.

Overall, Senate Bill 415 is just a simple way to ensure that more people can be economical in their choices of how to enjoy some of the best natural places our state has to offer, while also helping to give a boost to the revenues from annual State Park System admission passes to help better maintain these places.



RON TUSLER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 3rd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on Senate Bill 68
Committee on Natural Resources and Forestry
November 15, 2023

Chairman Cowles and committee members,

Wisconsin is home to some of the most beautiful and treasured state parks in the nation, if not the world. Our parks, like Devil's Lake State Park, are not just landscapes; they are the heartbeats of our communities, drawing over 20 million visits annually. These parks are not just natural resources; they are sources of joy, recreation, and pride for all Wisconsinites.

However, there exists a significant barrier that diminishes the accessibility and enjoyment of these natural treasures: the current structure of our state park vehicle pass system. As it stands, regardless of whether a pass is purchased in January or November, its validity expires on December 31st of that same calendar year. This policy discourages potential visitors as the year progresses, leading to a diminished experience and reduced park visitation in the later months.

This is where the proposed bill, Senate Bill 415, comes into play. This forward-thinking legislation proposes that a State Park Pass be valid for a full year from the month of purchase. If someone buys a pass in November 2023, it would remain valid until November 30, 2024. This simple yet impactful change would ensure that every Wisconsin resident and visitor receives full value for their investment in our state parks.

Moreover, this bill is not just about fairness; it's about fostering a deeper connection between our communities and our natural heritage. By incentivizing year-round park visitation, we encourage healthier, more active lifestyles and a greater appreciation for our natural environment. The increased sales of annual passes, especially during the summer and fall, will not only boost our local economies but also provide much-needed funds for the maintenance and enhancement of our parks.

We have carefully considered the implementation of this policy and propose a delayed start until 2025. This delay will allow adequate time for the necessary IT changes and



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the production of new stickers that signify the month of sale. This thoughtful planning ensures a smooth transition to this new system.

In conclusion, Senate Bill 415 is more than just a legislative proposal; it's a commitment to enhancing the value of our state parks for every person who visits them. It's an acknowledgment that our natural resources are a year-round treasure that should be accessible and enjoyable to everyone, regardless of the season. I urge you to support this bill, not just for the present generation, but as a legacy we can proudly leave for the future stewards of Wisconsin's natural beauty.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy

*2023 Senate Bill 415
Annual Vehicle Admission Receipt Validity Period
November 15, 2023*

Good morning, Chair Cowles, and members of the Committee. My name is Steve Schmelzer, and I am the Director of the Bureau of Parks and Recreation Management for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes on Senate Bill 415, related to annual vehicle admission receipt validity period.

State Park and Forest annual admission sticker sales have risen by nearly 37 percent since 2019. Currently, as outlined in statute, stickers are valid for a calendar year and expire on December 31st of each year, regardless of when they were purchased. These stickers must be affixed to the front driver's side windshield of vehicles. There are six types of annual admission stickers currently sold which are serialized and tracked as part of an inventory system for every property and DNR Service Center. The annual stickers include:

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| 1) Wisconsin Annual Resident | \$ 28.00 |
| 2) Wisconsin Reduced Rate (2 nd vehicle) | \$ 15.50 |
| 3) Wisconsin Resident Senior (65+) | \$ 13.00 |
| 4) Nonresident | \$ 38.00 |
| 5) Nonresident Reduced Rate (2 nd vehicle) | \$ 20.50 |

Under Senate Bill 415, the annual admission sticker would change to being valid for 12 months from the date of purchase. It is difficult to predict if this would impact the number of stickers sold during the year. The change would most likely cause sale of stickers to be more evenly spread throughout the year. Currently sales are more concentrated the first six months of each year. Visitors may be more inclined to purchase an annual sticker later in the year, rather than a daily admission sticker, if they were assured to have a full 12 months of access.

To accomplish this change, there would be several operational changes and financial resources needed within the State Park System. Admission sticker design would need to be modified to allow for the date of purchase or expiration date to be punched into the sticker itself. This may result in a slight increase to printing cost. The punching of the stickers would need to be a manual process. That change would increase sales time at properties for staff and our customers. The current online sales fulfillment process would be changed from an automatic process done through the Department of Administration, to a manual process of stickers being punched and mailed to customers. This would result in the need for additional Limited Term Employee staff members. Electronic payment stations that have been implemented at 40 properties around the state would not be able to dispense a Resident Annual Sticker as they currently do. These payment stations would instead dispense temporary receipts for all annual sales. The receipt would then be used to redeem an admission sticker, punched with the original purchase date, from staff at a later visit. An alternative to this approach would be to design stickers that

are easily differentiated by month and year of purchase. This is not the preferred method as it would greatly increase printing costs and complexity of inventory and sticker management.

The department supports all efforts to increase public access to the State Parks, Forests, and Recreation Areas. The department welcomes updates to the current admission system and sees a move to a 12-month admission system as a positive for the State Park System. Of course, we are always mindful of balancing the operational expenses of the system and would request the financial resources needed to implement a 12-month system.

Lastly, we want to thank the bill authors for the conversations we have had over the past couple of months. We appreciate their interest in increasing access to our State Park System, and we hope to continue to work together to ensure the availability of the resources needed to implement the 12-month admission system outlined in this bill.

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