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Panel looks at ways to add parks money

The Legislature-appointed group wants more time; it set a \$150 million yearly goal for new spending.

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A broad-based panel appointed by the Iowa Legislature has set a \$150 million-a-year goal for new spending on parks, trails and conservation over the next decade, but the panel wants more time to decide how the state should come up with the cash.

The advisory group will issue its preliminary report by Jan. 10, as required. But members, still wading through poll results and considering political angles, hope lawmakers will allow them to add to the report through March.

"This is 'new' money to add to existing resources, not a replacement 'shell game,'" the group noted in a presentation. "We need to create an initiative that is 'legislator-proof.'"

Lawmakers in tight budget times have taken money from natural resources accounts to balance the budget.

Most of the discussion surrounds, in no particular order, on an increase in sales taxes, a cut of taxes paid by the Iowa Lottery, tax credits for landowners who perform conservation work or allow public access to the property, gambling money, and bonds to be repaid with future casino receipts.

Jeff Vonk, director of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, said lawmakers have a chance to improve Iowa in many ways.

"This committee's work has the potential to leave a tremendous positive legacy," he said.

The effort also got a boost from the Iowa Policy Project, a nonprofit and nonpartisan think tank based in Mount Vernon. A new study from that group shows that financing for Iowa natural resources projects has been relatively flat for a decade. That group called for "stable and diverse funding sources" for key state environmental programs. The report also calls for full financing for a key program, the Resource Enhancement and Protection Program, which has received about half of what was intended for trails, land purchases and other work. The group also wants a tax on water sales to pay for environmental protection; a series of "polluter pays" charges; and an increase in the bottle deposit with an expansion in the list of containers included.

Report author Teresa Galluzzo wrote that Iowa ranked 38th in a 2004 ranking of states' local spending on the environment. "This lack of investment is reflected in our state's severe water-quality problems and lack of public land (Iowa ranked second to last on this measure)," she wrote.

"Not only do many people need access to the outdoors for their physical and mental health, recreation is good for the state economy," Galluzzo wrote. "... When Iowa's environment is under-funded, the state's economic potential is hampered."

Conservation and park improvements have been gaining a higher profile in Iowa. The conservation projects, including grassy buffer strips along streams, help provide habitat while easing the pollution running into hundreds of seriously polluted waters. The state parks have been drawing more visitors, and the state wants to fully restore them by 2020.

A new survey arranged by the committee and conducted by Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin and Associates last month found that a majority of Iowans are for spending more on conservation and parks - especially if someone else pays for it.

What other states have done

Other states have taken different approaches to solve the same shortfall of cash for parks, trails, conservation work and the like. Here's a rundown compiled by Anthony Phillips of Drake University for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation:

Arkansas: Conservation sales tax and real-estate transfer tax.

Colorado: Lottery proceeds, protected by Constitutional amendment.

Illinois: Real estate transfer tax.

Kansas: Fee increases

Minnesota: Lottery proceeds protected by Constitutional amendment, payments in lieu of taxes from the lottery, state tax checkoff.

Missouri: Two different sales taxes dedicated to conservation, parks, and soil conservation.

Nebraska: Lottery proceeds, fee increases.

South Dakota: Legislative appropriations.

Texas: Sporting goods tax.

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