

Proposed park plans to move ahead

Abby Hess, West Plains Daily Quill, May 18, 2016

With the failure of House Bill 2187 and corresponding Senate Bill 1011 to make their way through the Senate floor by the end of Missouri's legislative session last week, plans for Oregon County land purchased by Missouri Department of Natural Resources to be turned into a state park may move forward.

Both bills sought to restrict the ability of DNR and other state agencies to purchase acreage in Oregon County and force the state to sell the Buildings for Babies and Fredrick Creek ranch properties acquired in January by auction on courthouse steps, or else return the land to Oregon County.

Sen. Mike Cunningham (R-Rogersville), who authored SB 1011, said both bills' failure to progress was due to filibustering by Senators Jason Holsman (D-Kansas City), Scott Sifton (D-Affton), and Jill Schupp (D-St. Louis). "They were adamantly opposed to the bills and filibustered long enough that the bills were laid over after an extended floor debate," Cunningham said, adding that, once off the floor, he asked them if they had plans to continue the filibuster if the bill came up again.

"They replied yes, they were determined to stop the bills. The Sierra Club and State Parks Association members initiated a call-in campaign demanding that the bills not be allowed to pass," said Cunningham.

Missouri Sierra Club Chapter Director John Hickey told the Quill by phone the club became interested in the contested park proposal because the club sees both recreational and ecological value in a park at that site, which is along the Eleven Point River. Hickey pointed out that much of the river and adjacent land is already protected as a National Scenic Riverway with easements, but parts of the river are under threat from cattle running along the water. Cunningham said that after the call-in campaign began, Gov. Nixon stated his intention to veto either bill if it passed, fueling park advocates' determination to stop the bills' progress.

Hickey said a Oregon and Howell counties boast a substantial number of Sierra Club members, many of whom are "big advocates" of the park. In addition to local supporters, the club chapter also heard from advocates throughout the state of Missouri who said they like to travel to Oregon County to backpack in the nearby Irish Wilderness and stood behind the proposal to turn the ranch properties into a park.

"Folks who were most familiar with the river were the most invested in protecting it," Hickey noted. He said he also heard from a number of small business owners nearby the affected land; they told him they supported the park idea for the opportunity to bring in more tourism dollars.

DNR spokesman Tom Bastian told the Quill that park benefits bring more economical value than the loss of property tax revenue, a sum of \$3155 including real estate and personal property taxes for the Buildings for Babies ranch alone, according to Misty Hower, Oregon County Collector. The Frederick Creek Ranch paid only real estate property tax prior to its sale, about \$2,000.

"While state property is not subject to local property taxes, DNR provides payment in lieu of taxes for a period of five years following the acquisition of land," Bastian explained. He cited results of an economic impact study released in 2012 that showed that, in 2011, visitors to state parks spent an estimated \$778 million that year, with an overall impact of \$1.08 billion in sales, \$307 million in income, and \$123 million in federal, state, and local taxes.

"Also, visitors' expenditures support 14,535 jobs. For every dollar spent by DNR to operate the state park system, Missouri's economy saw a \$26 return on investment," he added, citing the report published by J.D. Witter. "These impacts show that Missouri state parks enhance the state's economy as well as improve visitors' health and well-being."

Hickey agreed, saying that the timber industry has long thrived in Oregon County, but the tourism industry is bigger. He pointed one county north to Shannon County, where he says state parks have played a strong role in boosting the economy.

The National Parks Service's 2016 Visitor Spending Effects report details spending habits of tourists in what the service terms "gateway communities" – or communities near national parks. Looking toward Shannon County, the Ozarks National Scenic Riverways brought nearly 1.3 million visitors in 2015, of which 70 percent were non-local. Visitors from near and far spent \$53,886 and directly supported 835 jobs. Non-local visitors contributed to 89 percent of that spending and supported 91 percent of those jobs.

Cunningham, meanwhile, hasn't changed his tune. "I did everything I could to get (opponents of the legislation) to stop, but they refused to negotiate," he said. "I am still very much against this land purchase."
For more about the proposed park, see Thursday's Quill.