

Cuts might affect Richmond parks

Rachel_Ganong@TimesRecord.Com

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RICHMOND — Officials in two state departments have proposed slashing funds for Swan Island and Peacock Beach, in a response to state budget mandates that could leave the town with reduced access to both public lands as soon as July 1.

Both the state Department of Conservation, which operates Peacock Beach State Park, and the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, which operates Swan Island's Steven Powell Wildlife Management Area, have cut \$23,000 and \$22,000 in funding for the two lands, respectively, from their proposed budgets, dealing Richmond a double dose of potential recreational impact.

"It's certainly disappointing in the sense that it's two public lands in Richmond," Town Manager Thomas Fortier said at Thursday night's selectmen's meeting.

He and Selectman Seth Goodall lobbied against the proposed cuts in Augusta on Tuesday, attempting to show that cuts offered in two separate department budgets would strike both state lands in one town.

"If you look solely at public lands, we're losing both of ours," Goodall said.

Both reduced funding proposals are still before the Legislature, which is attempting to pass a state budget that would fill a \$190 million revenue shortfall.

That shortfall prompted state administration to direct the Department of Conservation to shave \$868,000 from its operating budget, a sum that encompasses funding for Peacock Beach.

"The reason that we chose Peacock Beach was because, in the grand scheme of things, it was not a heavily visited park," said Jim Crocker, public information director for the Department of Conservation.

Peacock Beach, a 100-acre beach and picnic area located off Route 201 on Pleasant Pond, attracts around 9,300 visitors during its operating season of Memorial Day to Labor Day in contrast with the 12,000 visitors to similarly sized Damariscotta Lake park.

The proposed cuts of \$23,000 would eliminate seasonal park manager and lifeguard positions at the park, a sum that is not covered by \$3 park entrance fees because of discounts or free entry for people like children and seniors and those with park passes, he said.

"The way it works out, we don't collect from every one who comes in," he said.

Crocker said he's not sure if eliminating staffing at the park would force its closure. "We still are hoping to talk to people in the town about the town taking over operation," he said, noting that some state-owned lands like Lake George state park are operated through leases to other entities.

Despite the department's recommendation, however, funding for Peacock Beach may remain in this year's budget. Crocker said the Legislature's Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee on Thursday chose not to recommend the cuts, although they may be reinstated before budget discussions conclude.

Crocker isn't sure if the recommendation resulted from the fact that funding for both public lands in Richmond were proposed to be cut, but the recommendation could help funding for Peacock Beach to be spared.

For Swan Island, a 1,755-acre wildlife management area in the Kennebec River, proposed cuts would eliminate overnight camping on the island. Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Commissioner Roland Martin said his department proposed cutting \$22,000 in general funds that would trigger an additional loss of \$6,000 in federal funding for Swan Island after being tasked to shave almost \$1 million in its operating budget.

In the latest budget exercise, requested cuts to the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife budget were reduced by nearly half to \$415,000, but as yet still affect Swan Island.

"We're not shutting down Swan Island. What is being proposed in the budget is to cut out overnight stays," Martin said this morning,

adding that the department would still ferry visitors to the island for day trips if the budget allows.

Asked if he realized the Department of Conservation also targeted a Richmond park, he said he hasn't spoken directly with the Department of Conservation though the departments could potentially collaborate with Richmond officials to lessen the impact.

"I know that the officials from Richmond are concerned," he said.

But for now, cuts have to come from somewhere. "The fact of the matter is it's one of our many, many initiatives," he said.