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# DEVELOPMENT & ACQUISITION STATUS

William O'Brien  
State Park



November 27, 1989

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## MINNESOTA STATE PARK SYSTEM

The mission of the Division of Parks and Recreation is to provide a state park system that perpetuates Minnesota's scenic beauty and its natural and cultural resources, while being responsive to public needs and expectations, and providing a diversity of recreational opportunities.

The Division of Parks and Recreation manages 64 state parks across Minnesota. The state park system is vital to Minnesota's tourism, an industry that is becoming the backbone of many economies in greater Minnesota. Our most unique and valuable cultural and natural resources are found within state park boundaries. It is the Division of Parks & Recreation's responsibility to acquire, protect and interpret these unique resources.

Prior to the 1989 legislative session, funding constraints and increasing visitor use seriously eroded the Division of Parks and Recreation's ability to provide quality recreational experiences and services. Since then the Governor and state legislators have responded to the need for increased funding for the operations budget. However, financing the maintenance of existing facilities and new development in the face of increasing visitor use remains a problem. This will be addressed during the 1990 legislative session when a capital bonding bill is considered.

The state park system has the Department of Natural Resource's (DNR) largest physical plant with over 2,800 major facilities requiring major rehabilitation. The Division of Parks & Recreation has identified more than \$55 million in capital budget needs. These projects include land acquisition, resource management, major rehabilitation or replacement of existing facilities and a few new facilities. Legislative funding requests to meet this need will be spread throughout future bienniums.

A recent study conducted by the Minnesota Historical Society identifies 515 historic structures located in the state park system. These structures are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Most of these structures are of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Work Progress Administration (WPA) vintage. The CCC/WPA structures were constructed in the 1930's. These facilities are over 50 years old and many are in need of major rehabilitation which includes the electrical, sewage, and water systems associated with these buildings.

Many years of intensive use is also a consideration when looking at the current condition of campgrounds, picnic areas, group camps and trail systems. Lack of development and rehabilitation of these and other state park facilities will reduce park use. A reduction in state park use will adversely impact the economic development of adjacent communities and Minnesota's effort to improve tourism.

As capital development funds have become available we have completed the highest priority projects. As additional needs are identified, they are reviewed and placed on the statewide priority list for future completion.

In 1991 Itasca, Minnesota's oldest state park, will be 100 years old. For 100 years, Minnesota has had a park system to be proud of. The present challenge is to manage the park resources and recreational development to ensure that Minnesotans will be proud of their state park system for another hundred years.

# AN OVERVIEW OF WILLIAM O'BRIEN STATE PARK

William O'Brien State Park is located in extreme eastern Washington County on the St. Croix River approximately 30 miles northeast of the Twin Cities Metropolitan area between the cities of Stillwater and Taylor's Falls. The park's statutory boundary encompasses 1,445.63 statutory acres. Of these 140 acres are privately owned. State Highway 95 bisects the park and provides the park's main access.

William O'Brien State Park offers visitors a variety of recreational opportunities within one hour's drive of the Twin Cities Metropolitan area. Camping, hiking, fishing, swimming and canoeing are favorite summer activities. Canoes may be rented inside or outside the park from concessioners who also provide a shuttle service. Exceptional cross-country skiing and back-pack camping are winter specialties. Fall colors, spring wildflowers, birdwatching and the year-round interpretive programs keep people coming back.

Sandstone formations made millions of years ago by inland seas are found along this part of the St. Croix Valley. More recently, glaciers lumbered south, scouring the sandstone and depositing soil and rocks of various sizes. As the glaciers melted, the tremendous volume of released water cut through the soft sandstone, creating the St. Croix River and landscaping the wide, boulder-strewn valley.

Dakota and Ojibway Indian tribes utilized the resources of the valley for centuries. European explorers searching for the Northwest Passage, and trappers engaged in the lucrative fur trade industry entered the valley in the 1600's. They were followed by the lumberjacks seeking to harvest the pine stands to the north. Numerous sawmills were established along the St. Croix in the vicinity of William O'Brien State Park. The industry flourished until the end of the 1800's.

William O'Brien, a lumber broker, bought much of the land once owned by the lumber companies and in 1945, his daughter, Alice O'Brien, donated 180 acres to be developed as a state park. Today, the park totals 1,445.63 acres.

The original vegetation of William O'Brien State Park consisted of a mosaic of prairie/oak savanna on the upland sites and floodplain forests in the bottomlands. Pines may have been scattered throughout. Today, as a result of past agricultural use and logging, very little of this remains. Prairie has been converted to "old field" and few native pines remain. Only in areas that were unsuitable for farming and other development does one find remnants of the original vegetation.

Yet the variety of existing plant communities provides habitat for diverse wildlife populations. Raccoon, mink, beaver, and woodchucks are prevalent. White-tail deer and fox are common sights throughout the year. Birdwatchers frequently spot woodpeckers, bluebirds, herons, raptors, and a variety of warblers.

# William O'Brien State Park

## LEGEND

### TRAILS

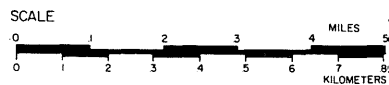
- Bicycle/Hiking
- ..... Ski or Hiking
- easy
- more difficult
- most difficult
- 8 Numbered Trail Markers (blue)

### FACILITIES

- ? Information
- Trail/Interpretive Center
- Picnic Area
- Beach
- Boat Access
- Trail Shelter
- Campground
- Canoe Camping
- Group Camp
- Trailer Sanitation Station



PRIVATE PROPERTY  
Public Use Prohibited  
(except on designated trails)



Remember to leave your car in the parking lot and not on the road. If you are in the car, please do not drink and drive. If you are in the car, please do not drink and drive. If you are in the car, please do not drink and drive.



## EXISTING FACILITIES

The following is an inventory of the existing physical plant of William O'Brien State Park.

Acres in Statutory Boundary - 1,445.63	Canoe Rental
Acres of state land - 1,286.93	Miles of Road
Acres of private land - 140.0	Asphalt - 2.0
Acres of R.R. Right of Way - 18.70	Gravel - 2.0
Campsites	Picnic Shelter - 3
Drive in - 127	Number of Picnic Tables - 220
Back Pack - 2	Trailer Dump Station - Yes
Canoe in - 1	Water Accesses - 1
Group Camps - 2	Number of Buildings
Showers	Over 100 sq.ft. - 13
Modern toilets	Under 100 sq.ft. - 10
Campsites with electricity - 62	Miles of Posted Boundary - 6
Miles of Trails	Visitor Center
Self-guided Interpret - 3.0	Park Utilities
Hiking - 9.5	Sewage Lagoon - 1
Bicycle - 2.0	Number of Sewage Lift Stations - 5
Cross Country Ski - 9.5	Number of Septic Tanks - 11
Snowmobile - 2.0	Number of Wells - 6
Playgrounds - 1	Number of Individual
Beaches - 1	Water Distribution Systems - 5

## PROBLEMS FACING WILLIAM O'BRIEN STATE PARK

There are many public recreational facilities in William O'Brien State Park to maintain. Many are in need of replacement or major rehabilitation. Most were constructed in the 1960's, and are now in need of rehabilitation. Many new facilities are needed to meet growing recreational demands.

There is a growing demand for interpretive services in the park. The trail/interpretive center cannot currently handle the numbers of people participating in evening programs, special event, or environmental education programs. An outdoor amphitheater and remodeling of the building are needed to accommodate current visitors.

Probably most important is the protection and restoration of the natural and cultural resources in the park. This includes restoring the oak-savanna areas along with the other vegetation types that typified pre-European settlement.

No systematic survey for cultural resource has been done in William O'Brien State Park. Indian burial mounds as well as ancient encampments deserve to be located, protected and interpreted.

The 1988 Washington County Biological Survey identified several plant species that may be found only in William O'Brien State Park and a handful of other places. More baseline inventories need to be conducted. These plants and their habitat must be protected.

Services to the public have also increased. Reservation systems, credit-cards, souvenirs, ski permits, marketing, year-round interpretive services, training, and task force participation are just a few of the areas that have put an extra load on our staff. This extra load is particularly evident in the metro area where more people with higher expectations are recreating closer to home.

Many years of overuse is also a consideration when looking at the current condition of campgrounds, picnic areas, group camps, and trail systems. These items also need extensive rehabilitation. The more than 4 miles of roads in the park must also be considered when looking at development and rehabilitation.

Important improvements have been completed at William O'Brien State Park in recent years. However, the goals identified in the ten year old management plan have not been achieved.

## **RECENT DEVELOPMENT IN WILLIAM O'BRIEN STATE PARK**

Major development projects over the past few years have included:

1. Construction of the Samuel H. Morgan Trail/ Interpretive center.
2. Rehabilitation of the roads and sites in the lower campground.
3. Erosion control along the St. Croix River.
4. Addition to contact station.

## **WILLIAM O'BRIEN STATE PARK CAPITAL NEEDS**

### **RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

#### **Resource Management - \$90,000**

At this point in time, no restoration to prairie/oak savanna has been initiated in the park. In addition, apart from the County Biological Survey of Washington County (1988) no complete inventory has been done of the existing natural resources. No systematic survey of cultural resources has been done.

**Prairie Restoration - \$40,000**

**Floodplain Restoration - \$20,000**

**Cultural/Natural Resource Inventory - \$30,000**

**Subtotal \$90,000**

### **MAJOR REHABILITATION**

#### **Pave Upper Campground Roads - \$130,000**

Blacktop would be laid down to eliminate dust problems in upper campground. This project would also include paving the trailer dump station and shop road.

#### **Remodel Lower Campground Sanitation Building - \$100,000**

The roads and sites have been rehabilitated but the existing building is almost 30 years old and in need of repair. This building does not have handicap accessible showers.

#### **Remodel Contact Station - \$80,000**

Existing building does not have public restrooms or adequate storage and display area for gift items. This project would improve public service.

#### **Rehabilitate Upper Campground and Buildings - \$220,000**

This project would improve sites and screening and would remodel existing sanitation building. Ten electrical sites would be added.

#### **Replace Existing Water lines - \$60,000**

This project would replace old pipe and allow for individual water shut-off.

#### **Rehabilitate Group Camp Areas - \$40,000**

Would improve site at canoe group camp and improve sites and screening at pioneer group camp.

#### **Rehabilitate Shop Area and Buildings - \$100,000**

This project would remodel existing buildings and include blacktop of shop area and screening view of shop from trail.

#### **Erosion Control - \$60,000**

Erosion continues to be a problem along the St. Croix River. This project would provide areas to reduce human impact and erosion from flooding.

#### **Rehabilitate Beach Area - \$20,000**

This project would include weed control and landscaping.

**Rehabilitate Concession Building and Picnic Area - \$90,000**

Remodel concession building to accommodate vending machines and landscape picnic area.

**Rehabilitate Trail System - \$80,000**

To include realignment, new trails, vault toilets and erosion control.

**Remodel Trail/Interpretive Center - \$200,000**

This project would increase square footage to allow for increased user demand and office/storage space.

**Subtotal \$1,180,000**

**NEW DEVELOPMENT**

**Replace Lower Campground Sanitation Building - \$200,000**

This project would replace existing building if remodeling is not economically efficient.

**RV Group Camp - \$300,000**

This project would allow for an 80 site group camp for trailer clubs, etc. Would include all electrical sites, sanitation building, dump station and well.

**Amphitheater - \$100,000**

Would allow for outdoor interpretive programs, special events and concerts.

**Interpretive Displays - \$50,000**

Develop interpretive displays for the visitor center and throughout the park.

**Creative Play Area - \$25,000**

Would provide a focal point of visitor activity near the interpretive center and provide entertainment for children.

**Boardwalks, Fishing Piers, Observation Decks - \$130,000**

Would provide for visitor enjoyment while protecting sensitive areas from human impact. Will work closely with regional resource manager.

**Storage Building - \$65,000**

To provide for adequate storage of small equipment such as lawnmowers, grooming equipment, etc.

**Subtotal \$870,000**

**TOTAL**

**DEVELOPMENT NEEDS \$2,140,000**

## LAND ACQUISITION

There are approximately 20,000 acres of private land within the boundaries of Minnesota State Parks. Acquisition of these lands is an ongoing process that occurs as parcels become available for purchase and funds are available. Present acquisition costs are averaging about a \$1,000 per acre across the state. It would therefore cost about \$20,000,000 to acquire all the private land within state parks at present values.

The park map shows the location of private holdings within the park. These properties should be purchased before private development increases within the park's statutory boundary.

The following issues highlight problems associated with private property within state parks.

- \* Private lands within state parks are being sought out by developers.
- \* Subdivision for residential use will cause such lands to be too expensive to acquire in the future.
- \* Land uses such as gravel extraction and clear cut logging adversely impact state parks and adjoining public lands.
- \* Some private lands limit public use of existing park facilities and lands because of their location.

These issues associated with privately owned lands within state parks threaten existing public investment and limit public use.

### PRIVATE LANDS TO BE ACQUIRED IN WILLIAM O'BRIEN STATE PARK

Parcel #	Acres
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11	40.0
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15	60.0
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16	40.0
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Total 140 acres.

## PARK POTENTIAL

What efforts will the completion of resource management, rehabilitation and new development projects have on William O'Brien State Park? These projects along with the acquisition of private lands within the park will assure the preservation of these unique resources and facilities for future generations. Active management will be required to maintain and regenerate existing forest stands and prairie. These will ensure that future visitors will be able to experience the ever-changing vegetation.

Some improvements will not only increase park use but will greatly increase the quality of the visitors experience. Many of the rehabilitation projects will increase staff efficiency and cut the costs of maintaining facilities.

New facilities will improve customer service while giving the visitor a greater opportunity to learn about Minnesota's natural and cultural resources.

The acquisition of private lands within the park will assure that private and commercial development do not distract from the natural beauty of William O'Brien State Park.

A stable funding source is essential for effective long term resource management and capital budget planning for the Minnesota State Park system and William O'Brien State Park.

### SUMMARY

Currently, statewide capital needs for development and acquisition are **\$55,000,000**. The mission of the Minnesota State Park System can be achieved by funding support to meet this need over the next several bienniums.

William O'Brien State Park acquisition costs will be determined by appraisals.

William O'Brien State Park  
development needs - **\$2,140,000**

Help us celebrate the 100th anniversary of the  
Minnesota State Park System in 1991!

