



cost pathway to the outdoors available for Californians who might otherwise be priced out.

- 2) **Background. *State Library Parks Pass Program.*** The Program provides free access to state parks through 33,000 passes that can be checked out from public library branches throughout the state. Passes can be checked out by all library card holders. The program was first established in FY 2021-22 when the state provided \$3 million per year through FY 2023-24. The Program received an additional \$13.5 million in FY 2022-23 to increase the number of free passes available through FY 2023-24. The FY 2024-25 and 2025-26 budgets included additional allotments of \$6.5 million (General Fund) per year. As noted earlier, the Governor’s budget proposal for FY 2026-27 includes \$6.75 million (General Fund) on an ongoing basis for the Program. The LAO recommends that the Legislature reject this proposal, noting that while the program does facilitate Californians’ access to parks, it does not “meet a pressing health and safety need. Moreover, the state already funds a number of other free state parks pass programs, including for lower-income residents who may face more barriers to access.”

***Other Discounted Passes.*** State Parks offers several other discounted or free park admission opportunities for specific populations. Eligibility criteria and levels of park access vary across these passes. Examples include the disabled discount pass for persons with permanent disabilities, the golden bear pass for low-income individuals, the senior golden bear pass for people 62 years of age and older, the adventure pass for fourth graders and their families, the distinguished veterans pass for honorably discharged veterans who meet certain criteria, and free park admission to eligible veterans and military personnel on Veterans Day and Memorial Day.

***State Park and Recreation Fund.*** The SPRF is the department’s primary ongoing funding source and is mostly supported by user fees. According to the LAO, in recent years, for a variety of reasons, yearly expenditures from the SPRF have exceeded its typical level of annual revenues. During the pandemic, the General Fund provided \$114 million in one-time support to offset anticipated reductions in revenues resulting from park closures. However, this and other one-time transfers have not addressed the long-term trends affecting the solvency of the SPRF.

While increasing park access is a laudable goal, generating sufficient, long-term sources of funding for State Parks operations and maintenance has been an ongoing challenge, raising the question of how far the state should go in discounting fees. The more the state discounts fees, the more the state will need to offset lost revenues with the General Fund or cut or eliminate other improvements, services, and programs. This is particularly relevant as State Parks’ large backlog of deferred maintenance is estimated at over \$1 billion. In addition, several state park properties have been devastated by recent wildfires, further reducing revenue streams as well as requiring costly repairs.

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