

WSTPC NATIONAL ISSUES BULLETIN

July/August, 2005

An e-mail service for members of the Western States Tourism Policy Council by WSTPC Washington, DC, Representative Aubrey King (202.251.6845), who can provide more details on any of the issues reported here. Comments or suggestions are always welcome. **New information since the last National Issues Bulletin is in bold.**

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Reauthorization of Federal Highway Program

At last! Congress has finally reauthorized the Federal Highway Program with the passage of SAFETEA-LU (H.R. 3), nearly two years and eight Congressional extensions after the 10.1.03 expiration of TEA-21. SAFETEA-LU is a six-year reauthorization that provides \$286.4 billion.

The dollar amounts for the overall six-year reauthorization and for specific programs are confusing because we are already two years into this reauthorization cycle, which will end September 30, 2009. Nonetheless, we can conclude that not only is the overall \$286.4 billion nearly \$50 billion more than TEA-21, but also, with one notable exception, that programs directly beneficial to tourism and recreation fared reasonably well compared with TEA-21, with the following amounts not subject to appropriations:

***Transportation Enhancements* goes from \$590 million annually to \$686 million. *Scenic Byways* gradually increases from \$26.5 million per year to \$43.5 million in 2009.**

***National Park Roads* rises from \$165 million annually to \$225 million in 2009.**

***Public Lands Highways*, now \$226 million, rises in steps to \$300 million in 2009.**

***Recreation Trails* increases from \$50 million to \$85 million in 2009.**

Unfortunately, attempts to establish a new categorical program of Recreational Roads with funding of \$50 million, of which 68% would have been allocated to Forest Highways and the balance to the BLM, Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation, was not included in SAFETEA-LU because of fiscal constraints. Very

few new programs were authorized because there was not enough money to satisfy existing programs.

Now just two short years and we will begin working on the next reauthorization bill.

Public Lands Appropriations

Both House and Senate have passed H.R. 2361, the fiscal year 2006 appropriations for the Federal land agencies. Following are the comparable amounts for key public land and recreation programs, showing the 2005 budget figures, President Bush's proposed budget for 2006 and the amounts approved by the House and the Senate. As the figures show, the public land agencies in general and their tourism and recreation programs in particular have not done badly in this time of very tight Federal budgets.:

NPS Operations: 2006 appropriation, \$1.744 billion. President Bush's Budget, \$1.734 billion. Senate, \$1.750 billion.

NPS Operations Maintenance: 2006 appropriation, \$594.7 million. President Bush's Budget, \$595.6 million. 2005, \$582.7 million.

NPS Construction: 2006 appropriation, \$301 million. President Bush's Budget, \$324.3 million. 2005, \$353 million.

NPS Recreation and Preservation: 2006 appropriation, \$55 million. President Bush's Budget, \$36.8 million. 2005, \$61 million.

Forest Service Recreation: 2006, \$265.2 million. President Bush's Budget, \$257.3 million. 2005, \$257.3 million.

Forest Service Trails: 2006, \$72.5 million. President Bush's Budget, \$63.8 million. 2005, \$75.7 million.

BLM Recreation Management: 2006, \$66.1 million. President Bush's Budget, \$664.6 million. 2005, \$60.6 million.

Fish and Wildlife Refuge Management: 2006, \$393 million. President Bush's Budget, \$394 million. 2005, \$381 million.

Forest Service Fire Fighting: 2006, \$1.779 billion. President Bush's Budget, \$1.735 billion. 2005, \$2.099 billion.

Interior Department Fire Fighting: 2006, \$762 million. President Bush's Budget, \$756.6 million. 2005, \$831 million.

Facilitation of International Travel

Biometric Passports for Visa Waiver Countries. On June 15th, DHS Secretary Chertoff announced that the U.S. will accept the production of digital photographs to satisfy the October 26, 2005, requirement of biometric identifications on passports for travelers from the 27 countries in the Visa Waiver Program. By October 26, 2006, the VWP countries will have to begin issuing passports with integrated circuit chips, or e-passports. (On October 26, 2005, VWP countries must present an acceptable plan to begin issuing e-passports by October 26, 2006.) **There is concern that France and Italy will not be able to comply with this new digital photograph requirement.**

Passports for Western Hemisphere Travel. On another international travel issue, concern is growing over the potential impact on U.S.-Canadian and U.S.-Mexican travel of a new requirement that all travelers, including U.S. citizens, must begin by 2008 to provide passport identification. On April 14, 2005, President Bush expressed concern over the prospect that this new requirement may “disrupt the honest flow of traffic” and said he had told the Departments of State and Homeland Security to see if more flexibility could be exercised. Senators Olympia J. Snowe (R-ME), Susan Collins (R-ME) and Norm Coleman (R-MN) have strongly objected to the impact of the new passport ID rule on U.S.-Canadian travel and Coleman promises to introduce legislation allowing alternative proofs of identification.

Machine Readable Passports. Since 6/26/05 all travelers from visa waiver countries must required to have machine readable passports or they will not be allowed to enter the U.S. Carriers transporting anyone without a MR passport will be subject to a \$3300 fine per individual violation. This is the implementation of a requirement in The Immigration and Nationality Act that originally set 10/1/03 as the MR deadline but the deadline was extended and until now one-time waivers were granted VW travelers. Apparently all VW countries now issue MR passports but the problem will be with travelers with older passports that are not MR. The number of such travelers has steadily fallen but there are still about 100 travelers per day from VW countries without MR passports -- about one percent of all VW travelers. DHS and the State Department are requesting the industry to help get this message out to international travelers.

Gateways Bill

H.R. 585 is expected to come up for a floor vote in the House of Representatives when Congress reconvenes in September.

Representative George Radanovich (R-CA) reintroduced H.R. 585, the Gateway Communities Cooperation Act, in the first business week of the 109th Congress. After falling just short of the Senate finish line in the closing hours of the last two Congresses, a strong effort is being made to gain House passage early in the 109th Congress to allow

maximum time for Senate consideration. The WSTPC is meeting with key Senate staff to urge support for this legislation.

In order to get H.R. 585 on the “Consent Calendar” in the House, which would mean prompt voice vote approval, revisions are being made in the legislation so that it will not be classified as creating a “new program” that would not qualify for the consent calendar. The main change will be to drop the small grant program of \$10 million from the bill.

Recreation Fee Program

The WSTPC is now working with the Federal land agencies as they are developing guidelines for implementation of the ten-year new recreation fee authority passed by Congress in 2004 as the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA). Several interagency working groups have been formed to develop implementation guidelines for the new fee program. At a February 11 “Listening Session” at the Department of Interior with the interagency working group developing the newly authorized America the Beautiful Pass, the WSTPC urged the agencies to recognize the potential for this fee program to be more than just a source of revenue, but also a public information and marketing tool. The WSTPC also emphasized the importance of developing regional, intergovernmental passes and of working closely with state tourism offices and gateway communities in developing coordinated marketing campaigns combined with administration of the fee program. In a March 21, 2005, communication to Department of the Interior Director of External and Intergovernmental Affairs Kit Kimball, the WSTPC joined three other allied tourism and recreation organizations in urging that all interagency fee working groups meet with private and intergovernmental organizations to discuss the potential promise and ramifications of the new fee program.

At a June 24, 2005, “Listening Session” on the Recreation Resource Advisory Committees (RRACs) mandated by the REA, the WSTPC urged state level RRACs instead of national or broad regional ones. Since then WSTPC members have participated in several “Listening Sessions” in the West.

The Forest Service has announced that it will discontinue entrance fees at 480 relatively undeveloped sites (while retaining fees at 4,024 sites). This is hoped to help mitigate continuing strong opposition to the fee program as evidenced by the passage by six state legislative chambers of resolutions condemning the program and demanding Congressional repeal. Congress is not expected to pass such repeal legislation but will probably hold early hearings this fall on initial fee implementation plans by the agencies.

National Outdoor Recreation Policy Act

There has been no further action with regard to the National Outdoor Recreation Policy Act.

The WSTPC continues to work with the American Recreation Coalition and other recreation industry organizations to draft and advocate a National Recreation Policy Act.

This would establish for the first time a national commitment to development of a recreation policy for the country. The bill itself would make no substantive changes in recreation policies or programs, but it could result in a sea change in the emphasis given to recreation on the Federal lands. It would accomplish three major goals:

- (a) It would “declare a national policy regarding the management and use of lands and waters administered by Federal agencies to provide the American public with abundant, high-quality and diverse recreational opportunities to enhance (1) public health and welfare, (2) appreciation of natural resources and the environment, and (3) economic benefits associated with outdoor recreation for gateway, rural and other communities;”
- (b) It would direct the Secretary of the Interior to lead an interagency effort to prepare within 12 months “a national recreation strategy that identifies statutory and regulatory impediments to providing and facilitating a diversity of recreational opportunities on Federally-managed lands and waters, and appropriate means to increase the quantity and quality of recreation opportunities available to the public;” and
- (c) It would establish an ongoing Federal Recreation Inter-Agency Coordinating Council, with state and local government officials and others from the industry as advisors, to improve coordination of recreation programs and policies and implement the national recreation strategy.

On February 9th, the WSTPC joined other industry organizations in explaining this significant legislation to key staff on Capitol Hill. Resistance is expected from environmental organizations that will object to the emphasis this legislation gives recreation and perhaps from some Federal land agencies that do not see recreation as a major part of their mission.

The draft bill is supported by at least 24 recreation trade associations although some have expressed concern that it would favor some modes of recreation over others. Most environmental and conservation organizations have not endorsed it. The Department of the Interior apparently has reservations about the need for national legislation and would prefer solving any problems through administrative actions.

Tax Credits for National Parks Introduced

Legislation has been introduced in Congress to authorize taxpayers to contribute \$1 or more to a National Park Centennial Fund from tax overpayments or from an annual tax payment form. The Senate bill, S. 886, was introduced by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and a House counterpart bill, H.R. 1124, has been introduced by Representatives Mark Souder (R-IN) and Brian Baird (D-WA). Although no estimate has yet been made about the amount of money expected to be raised from such a tax credit, a recent national poll indicated enough people would be willing to pay a tax of \$20 or more for maintenance and operations in the national parks to produce \$650 million. Congressional approval

would be complex because, as tax legislation, these bills would have to be approved by the Senate Finance Committee and the House Ways & Means Committee, as well as the Senate Energy Committee and the House Resources Committee, and would also likely stimulate concerns from the appropriations committees because they would be excluded from any control over the amount raised.