

Preserving Parks in the Garden State Senator Bob Smith

Throughout its history, New Jersey has been called the Garden State. This nickname comes from the state's abundance in farmland, wildlife, and beautiful outdoor sites. As the times have changed, the state has welcomed more and more residents, businesses, and services. Unfortunately, New Jersey's parks have been overlooked. Years of under-funding have caused New Jersey's parks to fall into a state of disrepair. A \$250 million backlog in repair maintenance projects has forced many parks to close while others are on the verge of becoming unsafe to their patrons. New Jersey parks record more than 18 million visitors each year to its 42 parks, 11 forests, 3 recreation areas, 43 nature areas, and numerous historical sites and districts.

This November, residents will be urged to give our existing parks a second chance. A ballot referendum will ask voters to allow a portion of the revenue from the corporate business tax to be dedicated toward the acquisition and development of open space lands for conservation and recreation. This amendment will give parks the funding they desperately need by put existing tax revenue to good use without raising taxes.

Since 1996, 4 percent of the annual revenue from the corporate business tax has been constitutionally dedicated to fund environmental programs. In November, voters will be presented the choice to approve the use of 15 percent of the money dedicated to environmental programs for park maintenance. If approved, the amendment will increase the amount in 2016. The remaining balance of the tax revenue used for environmental programs will continue to fund water quality projects, air pollution control programs, and other important environmental protection activities.

By approving this ballot referendum, residents will guarantee cleaner and safer parks for our children and families by creating a stable source of funding. An annual \$15 million will fund open space acquisition and development for local communities from this initiative. While the 2016 increase will mean a total of \$32 million per year for parks and recreational lands. These funds will assist all of New Jersey's parks including more than 50 properties in the state park system. Historic sites such as Princeton Battlefield State Park and Washington Crossing State Park as well as areas like Jenny Jump State Forest and Ramapo Mountain State Forest will benefit greatly by the constitutional amendment. Let's not forget the beloved Jersey Shore and the advantages our state beaches, including Island Beach State Park, will gain by this generous funding increase.

I'm happy to be a prime sponsor of this legislation (SCR105) and with your help on November 7th, we can pass this ballot referendum and ensure the continued preservation of open space in the beautiful Garden State. Your vote will give our state the opportunity to improve and preserve its parks and open space lands to benefit all of New Jersey's residents. Please help educate your family and friends about this issue so that we may enact good environmental policy come November.