

Editorial

Private pain

Allowing for-profit vendors to manage state parks and forests is a bad idea.

The Department of Environmental Protection and members of Gov. Chris Christie's administration are in talks regarding allowing private vendors to manage New Jersey's state forests and parks.

Several environmental groups have voiced concerns about the consequences of privatization. And while officials have made it clear they are talking about privatization — just talking — we're worried, too.

We realize money is the issue here. When isn't it? According to DEP Commissioner Bob Martin, the organization barely has enough in the budget to run the parks through the end of this year. While we agree that it makes sense to look at ways to save money, we don't believe privatization is the best option.

New Jersey isn't the first state to consider using private vendors to run state facilities. Florida and the U.S. Forest Service privatized a number of areas years ago.

Here in Burlington County, we are lucky to have a number of state forests and parks, including Rancocas State Park in Westampton, Bass River State Forest, Wharton State Forest, Brendan Byrne State Forest in Pemberton Township and Woodland, and Green Bank State Forest. We also have state-run recreational sites, such as the Atsion Recreation Area in Shamong, Batsto Village in Washington, and Historic Whitesbog Village in Pemberton Township.

As county residents, we don't want to do anything that might jeopardize or limit access to these areas, and privatization may do just that.

On the surface, it makes sense. Private company employees, not state personnel, would handle all park operations, charge entrance and other user fees, and pay the state a percentage. Maintenance as well as the salaries, benefits and pensions of park and forest employees would be someone else's problem. But when a for-profit gets involved — well, they don't call them "for-profits" for nothing.

As Jeff Tittel of the Sierra Club recently pointed out, the management of a venue such as Island Beach State Park on Long Beach Island would make a lot more money regularly renting out the entire facility for corporate picnics than by opening it to a few potential visitors. Fees will surely go up, park hours could change and access may be restricted to certain areas on certain days.

Most local parks don't charge an entrance fee. We don't believe most visitors would have a problem paying a small fee to enter a park or use its facilities. Since opting for private management will pretty much guarantee a hike in user fees anyway, the state should consider increasing or adding fees to its parks and forest areas now.

Since the DEP and the state have not offered any specifics as to what would be privatized, we shudder at the worst-case scenario here: the potential for renaming some of the parks or forests and the inclusion of outdoor advertising, resortlike development and fast-food restaurants.

There's something more than a little unsettling about someday being able to pull up to a drive-through window and order a "McBlueberry" shake at Whitesbog Village.

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