State parks post record

Revenue helps system fund itself

By Bruce Smith
The Associated Press

CHARLESTON—South Carolina's state parks are moving to become self-supporting after a year in which they generated a record $21 million in revenue.

State Parks, Recreation and Tourism Director Duane Parrish says the goal now is to have the parks self-sustaining in just over 18 months, the end of the upcoming state fiscal year.

"We came close this year. We had our highest revenue ever. We should reach operational self-sufficiency by the end of 2013-14," he told the AP after a recent announcement that readers of Conde Naste Traveler Magazine had voted Charleston the top tourist town in the world.

The state's system of 47 parks comprising 80,000 acres has been working to pay its own way and had originally set a goal of becoming self-sufficient by the end of the calendar year 2013.

"It was a goal. It was a target and we'll keep running as fast as we can to get to it," Parrish said.

The parks cost about $24 million a year to operate.

To reach its goal, among other things, the parks system has raised its rates for cabins and campgrounds to make them more in line with private attractions.

The parks are also adding events, such as the fireworks last July 4 at Charles Towne Landing State Historic Site in Charleston, the location where South Carolina was founded.

"We think we have the ability to do some things other places can't do, and we can offer them for a competitive price that really doesn't have any additional costs for us," he said.

The state is also developing its first-ever guidebook for the parks. Parrish said the new book is being underwritten by BMW and Fuji film, both of which have major manufacturing plants in the state.

Parrish said that only state park systems in New Hampshire and Vermont currently pay their own way and both of those systems have ski resorts which generate revenue.

The Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism is also looking at issuing a revenue bond for capital investments such as a water park at Sesquicentennial State Park outside Columbia, Parrish said.

Parrish said last fiscal year's increase in revenues may be due in part to people looking for better entertainment values in a troubled economy.

"We still cost a lot less than some of the private sector things a family may want to do," he said.