

Frequently Asked Questions:

Vehicle license tab donations for Washington State Parks

Question: I just got my vehicle license tab notice and see that there's \$5 added on for state parks. Is this something new? Can you explain?

Answer: The 2009 Legislature passed a law establishing this program to keep state parks open. Starting with tab renewals due in September 2009, renewal notices and new registrations include the \$5 donation that goes directly to operate state parks and keep them open. The state budget says specifically that parks will remain open as long as adequate donations are collected through this program. For more information, visit www.parks.wa.gov. Payment of tab renewal fees and any donations are made to DOL online, by mail or in person at vehicle licensing offices.

Question: Where does the donation money go? How do we know it doesn't just go into the state for general purposes?

Answer: The money is collected by the state Department of Licensing (DOL), and it is transferred directly to Washington State Parks for basic operations – in other words, to keep parks open and available. The money covers the cost of park staffing, utilities, day-to-day operations and maintenance and visitor services.

Question: If it's already included on my bill, do I really have a choice? Is it really a donation?

Answer: Yes, it is a donation, and you do have a choice. If you don't wish to donate, subtract the \$5 on the payment coupon.

Question: Wasn't there a donation program for parks already in place? Why did the Legislature change the program so that the donation is automatically included in my bill?

Answer: Yes, previously, there was a program where people could choose to add a donation of \$5 or more to their tab bill to make improvements in parks. Now, because of the economy and budget reductions, State Parks will be depending on donations just to keep parks up and running. During the state budget process, the Legislature had to make many tough decisions and reductions in funding and services. Because of these budget cuts, State Parks was in jeopardy of having to close or mothball about 40 parks. Many people contacted the Commission and Legislature to say they want their parks to stay open, and lots of people said they would pay extra to keep them open. The Legislature responded by putting this program in place. Automatically adding the \$5 donation to the bill was a way to encourage the donation while still providing people a choice.

Question: In the first donation program, I had the choice of donating more than \$5 to State Parks. Now the DOL form only includes a \$5 donation. How can I donate more than \$5 to State Parks?

Answer: If you want to support state parks even more and make a larger donation, here are some ways:

1. You can write a check and send it or deliver it to Washington State Parks at this address:

Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission
Park Donation
P.O. Box 42650
1111 Israel Road S.W.
Olympia, WA 98504-2650

2. You can place a check in a donation box in a state park when you visit.

Question: I heard there are park closures because of the state budget. Is this true?

Answer: No parks have been closed because of the budget. The Legislature and Governor stipulated in the budget that state parks would remain open as long as donation collections are adequate to keep them open. That's why the Commission is hoping that people will choose to include their donations. The State Parks Commission, the Legislature and the Governor will be watching the program to see if the program will support keeping parks open out into the future.

In the final 2009-11 budget adopted by the Legislature and signed by the Governor, the State Parks operating budget was reduced by \$52 million in General Fund tax support for park operations, down from \$100 million General Fund in the previous budget. The Legislature replaced some of that lost tax money with \$19 million in fuel tax dollars associated with recreation uses (this may be temporary). The Legislature provided "spending authority" for State Parks to spend \$28 million if it is collected. This is based on a projection that State Parks would collect \$26 million in donations in the remaining months of the biennium (with program implementation starting with September 2009 renewals) and the remainder in fee increases from overnight accommodations. In 2009, State Parks, like other agencies, made substantial budget reductions in staffing and programs.

Question: Didn't State Parks get a bigger budget than before?

Answer: The total amount that State Parks may spend is higher than the 2007-09 budget. In 2007-09, the total agency operating budget was approximately \$149.8 million. The 2009-11 budget is \$152.9 million. But it is very important to note that the current budget is based largely on money not yet in hand – money the agency can spend only if it is collected through donations and fees. Following is a breakdown of fund sources for operation of the park system:

The 2007-09 budget was made up of:

- 66 percent real dollars in the form of General Fund tax money already in the bank and available to spend.
- 24 percent projected earned revenue from park fees for service (camping, overnight accommodations, watercraft launch fees.)
- 10 percent from dedicated funds for such things as federally funded programs.

The current (2009-11) budget is made up of:

- 30 percent real dollars in the form of General Fund tax money already in the bank and available to spend.
- 47 percent projected revenue from donations and park fees for service
- 10 percent from dedicated funds

Question: What if I make a mistake and later realize that I donated to parks when I didn't intend to. Can I get a refund?

Answer: Yes, refunds will be processed by Washington State Parks. Here's how to request your refund.

1. Visit www.parks.wa.gov and follow the link to "Donations" from the home page. Print a copy of the refund form, or call (360) 902-8844 to have a copy sent to you.
2. Fill out the form, and be sure to sign and date it. Follow the form instructions to attach a copy of your DOL Vehicle Registration Certificate (which will be used to verify your \$5 donation payment.) Send or deliver the form and certificate copy to Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, P.O. Box 42650, 1111 Israel Road S.W., Olympia, WA 98504-2650. Your refund will be sent to you by mail.

Question: How is the program going? Does it look like parks will remain open?

Answer: After four full months, the cumulative monthly average donations is \$1.1 million. To meet the enacted 2009-11 budget, donations need to be at a cumulative monthly average of \$1.2 million. Because of careful budget management beyond staffing and program reductions already take in 2009, state parks are remaining open. Budget management actions taken include doubling the agency's reserve account, continuing to hold vacancies open and continuing to curtail certain services and limit expenditures.

As long as donations continue coming in close to projection and the agency does not experience General Fund reductions beyond the \$3.2 million reduction already identified in the Governor's proposed 2010 supplemental budget, State Parks will continue to keep parks open.

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