

# Coming Attractions

Kentucky moves to find new ways to expand and enhance the state park system

BY TRACY LIGHTFOOT

**P**arks are usually places to relax, to unwind, to enjoy the calming effects of nature – but those peaceful feelings don't extend to the Kentucky State Park system itself.

In fact, the parks system is so busy Parks Commissioner J.T. Miller wasn't even sure where to begin in a recent interview.

There are numerous building projects kicking off in 2007, including various cottage and lodge developments, marinas and restaurants at some of the system's 53 parks and historic sites.

But one aspect of these projects Miller emphasized is that the park system is delving into more public/private partnerships to create those lodges, cottages, marinas, restaurants and even some golf courses.

In the past, marinas were the closest thing the state parks had to a public/private partnership – a system in which developers “lease park property and pay the state a rental in the form of a percentage of gross receipt and a monthly ground rent,” according to Gil Lawson, public information officer for the Kentucky Department of Parks. “In some cases, the state would reimburse a certain amount for infrastructure costs.”

“It's a great opportunity to work with the private sector to serve the needs of Kentucky,” Miller said. “There are many



Andy Olsen photo

*Kentucky Parks Commissioner J.T. Miller is overseeing the effort to add new programs and facilities throughout the state park system.*



## Public and Private – Working Together

The list below outlines projects for which the Kentucky state government plans to issue requests for proposal (RFP) in 2007. Having work done by private companies enables the government to move forward on projects that are not being funded by state money.

LOCATION	PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT
Fort Boonesborough	lodge, restaurant
Garrard County	lodge, restaurant
General Burnside	lodge, restaurant*
Green River Lake	lodge, restaurant, golf course**
Kentucky Dam Village	indoor water park
Kincaid Lake	lodge, restaurant
Lake Malone	cottages, marina
Yatesville Lake	cottages, restaurant

\*RFP already issued, deadline to respond has passed

\*\*RFP already issued, deadline is May 1

state parks without lodging, and the state does not have enough money to build cottages at all these properties.”

But, he said, the state can continue to build the tourist industry by “working in concert” with private companies.

It is a fairly long process, Miller said, because the requests for proposals are open for three months, then the state goes through a period of negotiation with the developer to finalize the contract. After that, though, the developer must break ground within two months.

Development projects are currently in various stages of progress at General Burnside Island State Park in Burnside, Green River Lake State Park in Campbellsville, Kincaid Lake State Park in Falmouth, Lake Malone State Park in Dunmore, Yatesville Lake State Park in Louisa, Fort Boonesborough State Park in Richmond, and Kentucky Dam Village State Resort Park in Gilbertsville. Plans for a new state park in Garrard County are also in the works.

### Expansion plans

It’s not just lodging additions that are growing Kentucky’s parks, either. They keep expanding in terms of acreage as well.

“One of the efforts we’re undertaking is to add land to our parks,” Miller said. This includes acquiring land that is endangered by development or is historically significant, he explained, adding that land acquisitions are being negotiated at many parks.

The parks system isn’t limiting itself to existing parks, either. The state purchased 90 acres in Garrard County earlier this year that will become a new state park. The

tract lies along the Kentucky River and is just a few miles from Camp Nelson, a historic Civil War site. It is also adjacent to a state nature preserve.

Kentucky State Representative Lonnie Napier (R-Lancaster) was “instrumental” in helping the parks system purchase the property, Miller said. Napier, who sits on the appropriations and revenues committee, said the park idea began as just a daydream.

“I asked myself what I could do that would be the most helpful for Garrard County,” he said. “And this just flashed up in my brain.”

So a few years ago Napier got some money set aside in the state budget for a feasibility study in the area, which returned positive results. Initial funding for the project was added to future budgets, and the state purchased the property for \$405,000 in January 2007.

“It may be the best project this county’s ever had,” Napier said, noting that the jobs generated for developing the park and future lodging, along with jobs at the park once it is completed, will help the area’s economy.

### Golf and restaurants

Golf courses are under way at Green River Lake and Grayson Lake, which also play into the Tees and Zzzs program the state park system began a couple of years ago. Packages are offered at nine

state golf courses known as the “signature series.” The courses are located throughout the state, at Kentucky Dam Village, Dale Hollow Lake, Grayson Lake, Yatesville Lake, Mineral Mound, Pine Mountain, Barren River, Pennyriple Forest and Lake Barkley.

The packages include lodging, meals, 18 holes of golf, golf cart, preferred tee times and a Kentucky Unbridled Spirit gift card.

Meals included are at park restaurants, which are being revamped with new names, themes, decors and menus.

The restaurant menu will prominently feature Kentucky Proud products – food items grown or made in Kentucky – of which the state parks system purchased \$146,000 worth last year. Kentucky Proud items are also sold in park gift shops, Miller said.

### Unbridled gifting

The gift card is another new initiative, piloted two years ago for just the state parks. The state was pleased with the program, but saw room to improve, Miller said. So the state changed vendors and expanded the program late last year to include more venues and gave it the “Unbridled Spirit” name. The cards can now be used at any state park, including at



*Cashing in on the popularity of gift cards, Kentucky now offers gift cards that can be used at numerous venues throughout the state.*

restaurants and gift shops, as well as the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, the Kentucky Artisan Center in Berea and the Thomas D. Clark Center for Kentucky History in Frankfort. In the first two months of the expanded gift card program, Miller said 160,000 were sold.

Right now the cards are available for purchase only at the participating locations and online, but Miller said they will soon be available at additional retail locations.



## Non-Profit Group Supports State Parks

**I**N mid-February, the state parks system announced the formation of the Kentucky State Park Foundation, a new 501(c)(3) non-profit to support the parks.

Kentucky Park Commissioner J.T. Miller said the foundation is independent of the government and will be similar to other groups like the Friends of John James Audubon State Park or the Olmstead Parks Conservancy. It was modeled after the groups that support the Kentucky Historical Society and the Kentucky Center for the Arts.

The goal, Miller said, is for the group to help with fundraising, advocacy and other “friends” groups.

Many projects are not large enough to interest the legislature, Miller said, and there are expenditures that the government doesn’t have money to meet, including “legitimate needs of the state parks that aren’t significant enough for appropriations.” The foundation will be able to accept grants and private donations that can be used to fund those projects that might otherwise never reach fruition.

For example, Miller said the Friends of John James Audubon State Park has purchased some of Audubon’s personal effects from eBay and different auction houses, including paintbrushes, a journal and a painting – something the state couldn’t do. Another interesting project involved the friends group’s purchase of the original copper plates used to produce one of Audubon’s books. Working with the University of Southern Indiana, the group used the plates to reproduce 500 copies of the book and then sold them for \$500 a piece as a fundraiser. A few copies are still available.

Commissioner Miller would also like to see more friends groups be created to support individual parks. Out of 53 parks, he said only seven have this type of support group. The groups volunteer at the parks, do fundraising and serve as docents, he said.

The foundation will also advocate for the parks, spreading the word and “working with community leaders and elected officials to make sure they keep the best interests of the parks in mind,” Miller said.

An overall mission for the foundation will be to reconnect families to the parks, he added. “We want to make sure children are exposed to the environment and history of Kentucky.”

*The Friends of John James Audubon State Park has contributed several million dollars worth of gifts to the park, many of which are housed at the Museum and Nature Center pictured here.*



*Park Manager Mary Dee Miller with a diorama of artist John James Audubon at work on display in the Museum and Nature Center at John James Audubon State Park in Henderson.*

Brian Bohannon photo



Brian Bohannon photo

### Co-branding

Another initiative designed to drive park traffic is a promotional partnership with Pepsi. Guests who bring in a Pepsi product will receive a free night’s stay for every night they purchase at a Kentucky State Park resort. The program will run through the first week in June.

“Pepsi’s been a great partner,” Miller said. “They’ve been helping us find ways to promote the parks.”

Former State Commerce Secretary Jim Host was responsible for working out the initial contract between the state park system and Pepsi, Miller said, adding that Host had “championed” the idea of “co-branding and co-promotion.”

### Choose your own adventure

Another program Miller hopes will bring more people to the parks is the Adventure series, which expanded this year. Now including the Family Adventure Quest, the Backcountry Adventure Series and the Kentucky History Adventure Quest – the latter two are new this year – the series encourages families to complete a series of activities at their own pace; when completed, participants are rewarded with Kentucky Unbridled Spirit gift cards.

The Family Adventure Quest is a photo scavenger hunt that leads families to different parks across the state. The Backcountry Adventure series fea-

tures four types of excursions at different participating parks – one-day excursions, one-overnight backpack trip, one-overnight canoe camp and two-overnight backpack or backpack/canoe combos. The Kentucky History Adventure Quest issues 30 challenges to participants in the form of a scavenger hunt.

“You can see a lot of Kentucky, see a lot of history and absorb a lot of culture,” Miller said. ■

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