

# TAKE IT OUTSIDE

## Pandemic Spurs Outdoor Pursuits

*When the pandemic sent unemployment skyrocketing and shut down bars, movies, and concerts, Wisconsinites found an outlet in the outdoors. Parks visits, sporting goods sales, and fishing licenses all shot upward, with the latter seeing first-time purchases surge. The extent to which this trend will continue is unknown, but local and state officials may wish to consider it as they set state spending for the next two years on parks, other public lands, and the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship land purchase program.*

From a hike in state parks to a first-time deer hunt, state and local data in Wisconsin show an exceptional increase in outdoor pursuits during the crisis months of COVID-19.

With unemployment for a time at its highest levels since the Great Depression and other leisure activities often curtailed, pastimes like biking, fishing, birdwatching, or just sunbathing were among the few options that could be practiced while maintaining social distance. Though perhaps not unexpected, the magnitude of the shift remains striking.

Much of this upsurge may dissipate as soon as regular employment and entertainment can be pursued. Still, some of the increase could prove durable enough to help boost visitor fee revenues for the state parks system, which has struggled after the elimination of its tax funding in the 2015-17 state budget; as well as conservation funding coming from hunting and fishing license fees, which have been [declining](#) in recent years.

At the same time, state and local officials may also want to give thought to whether spending levels on parks, public lands, boat ramps, and other green space are adequate to handle the high demand. Perhaps most prominently, lawmakers must decide in the coming months whether to renew the state's Stewardship

We thank Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts, the Departments of Natural Resources and Revenue, and the Legislative Fiscal Bureau for providing or publishing data that was used in this report.

program that funds purchases of public lands and improvements on them.

Though budgets are strained, the past year has demonstrated the value of public lands in the state, which benefit the health of the state's residents and environment and boost its battered tourism sector. The [U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis has reported](#) that outdoor recreation contributed \$7.7 billion to Wisconsin's gross domestic product in 2019 – 20<sup>th</sup> in the nation and 2.2% of the state's total GDP.

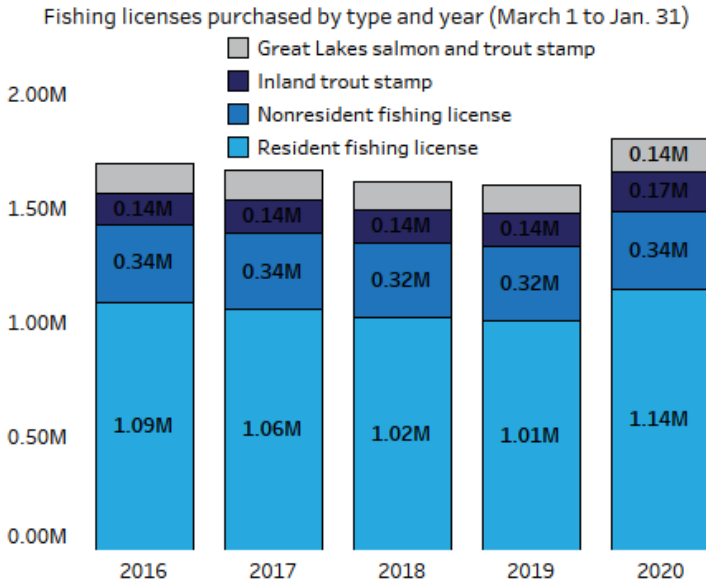
### DEMAND GROWS FOR FISHING AND HUNTING

After years of modest but steady decreases in fishing license sales, Wisconsin saw a substantial jump in the 2020 fishing season, according to data from the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR). From March 1, 2020 through Jan. 31, 2021, the state sold 1.14 million fishing licenses to state residents – a 13.2% increase over 1.01 million for the same months a year earlier and the highest in at least five years (see Figure 1).

In addition, licenses sold to anglers from outside Wisconsin were up 6.1% during the same months of the pandemic over the prior year. The extra stamps sold for trout and salmon fishing in the Great Lakes and for trout in other inland waters were up 16.6% and 20.4% respectively. In each case, the 2020 sales represented the highest total in at least five years.

Most striking were sales of first-time annual fishing licenses, which offer a reduced price for anglers (just \$5

**Figure 1: Pandemic Reverses Declining Fishing License Trend**



Source: Department of Natural Resources

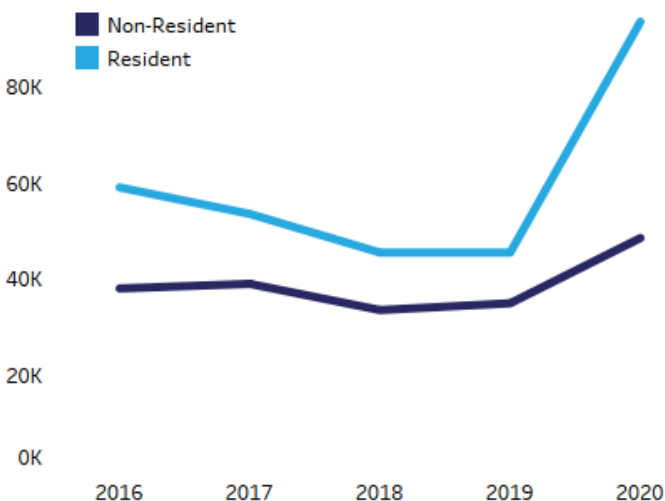
for state residents) who have never purchased a license or not done so for at least 10 years. From March 2020 to January 2021, first-time license sales to Wisconsin residents totaled 93,414, more than doubling the 45,557 sold during the same months in the prior year (see Figure 2).

First-time licenses to non-residents increased 38.6%. In both cases those were easily the highest in at least five years.

Data for hunting licenses are not as complete and are somewhat trickier to interpret – those licenses were

**Figure 2: 2020 Welcomes New Anglers to Wisconsin**

New fishing license purchases by residents and non-residents by year (March 1-Jan. 31)



Source: Department of Natural Resources

already on a more substantial decline prior to the pandemic. Yet licenses for deer hunting show an increase in 2020 and first-time hunting licenses also show increases, a notable finding given that merely holding steady would have represented a shift in a [previously downward trend](#).

In October, the DNR conducted an online survey of 8,822 of the adult first-time fishing license buyers – both in-state and out-of-state – and got responses from 30% of them. Thirty-nine percent of those surveyed said they had returned to fishing after many years away from the sport; 33% were truly buying their first fishing license; and 28% typically fish in another state but recently decided to fish in Wisconsin.

The majority of respondents said that COVID-19 was “not at all” an influence on their buying their first-time license. However, two of the most common reasons for the purchase were “a reduction in work/school hours” for 16% of respondents and “other leisure activities were no longer available to me” at 14%.

The DNR has previously linked a substantial increase in [fishing licenses sold in 2009](#) at the height of the Great Recession to higher unemployment, which allowed for more leisure activities. COVID-19 not only left many workers unemployed, but it also reduced the number of other leisure activities they and their children could pursue.

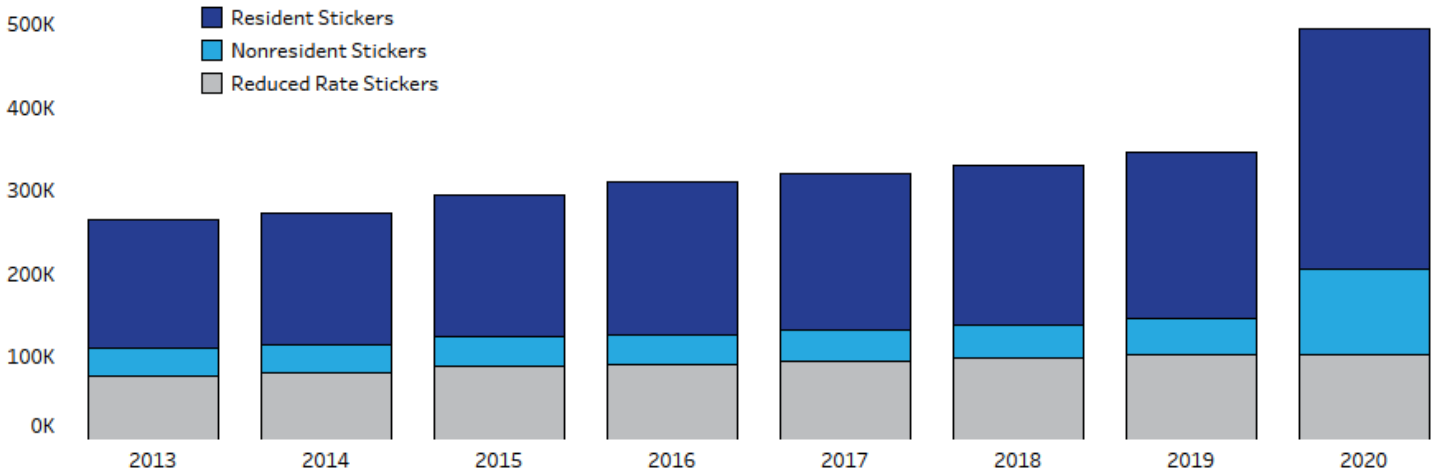
## OTHER OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES ALSO ON THE RISE

DNR data show a broad increase in other outdoor activities – from state park visits to trail passes for all-terrain vehicles. Sales of state park vehicle stickers rose by more than 42% in the 2020 calendar year over 2019 despite the fact that the 2020 data are missing December sales (see Figure 3).

Data on state park visits may not be as reliable – state parks were shut down at some points during the pandemic and the state figures represent a best general estimate because each property reports attendance differently. That said, the DNR data show 20.7 million visits in calendar year 2020, a 17.6% increase over 2019 and the highest year in our available data (again, the 2020 data do not include the month of December). Notably, these visits do not include other state lands, such as natural areas, for which no count is available.



**Figure 3: A Pandemic Surge in State Park Stickers**  
State park vehicle stickers purchased by year, 2013-2020\*



Source: Department of Natural Resources

\* Yearly totals are for January-November each year because December 2020 data is not yet available.

COVID-19 also accelerated the previous growth in annual trailpass sales for all-terrain and utility terrain vehicles in Wisconsin. From last April – the starting month for trailpass sales – through December, annual trailpass sales rose 32.7% over the comparable months in 2019 (see Figure 4) and were the highest by far in the decade of available data. Five-day passes also hit the highest levels in the available data.

- At Lion’s Den Gorge Nature Preserve in Ozaukee County, an entrance count shows 2020 visitors topped 269,000, more than two-and-a-half times the typical levels of around 100,000 per year.

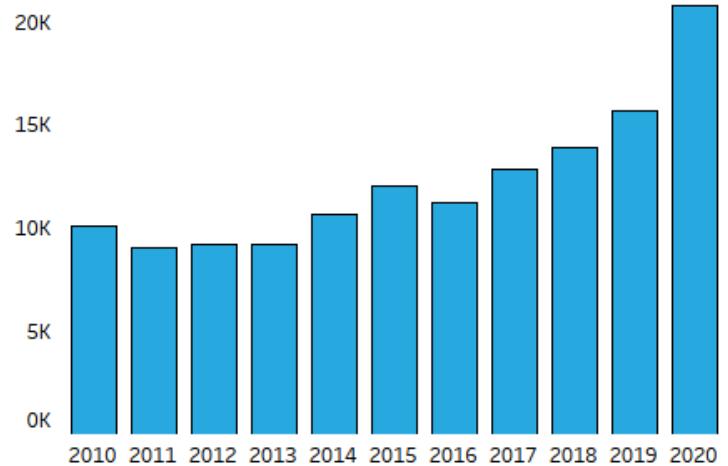
### Local Parks and Federal Lands See Interest

One of the striking aspects of the jump in outdoor pursuits is the breadth of the activities that saw a surge in interest. The DNR reports that downloads of popular phone applications that aid birdwatchers have seen year-over-year increases that far outpace those of recent years, and visits to their birding and bird conservation webpage more than tripled from April through June 2020 over the same period in 2019. One popular birdwatching app, eBird, also saw a year-over-year spring increase in submitted checklists from Wisconsin of 27%, far outpacing the growth seen in other recent years. In other examples:

- The city of Madison saw its 2020-21 sales of cross country ski permits for its parks nearly double those of any previous year.
- Bike path counters show non-motorized traffic on the Racine County North Shore Trail and the New Berlin Trail were up 74.9% and 58.4% respectively in 2020.

**Figure 4: ATV Usage Peaks**

ATV trailpass sales\* from April through December, 2010-2020



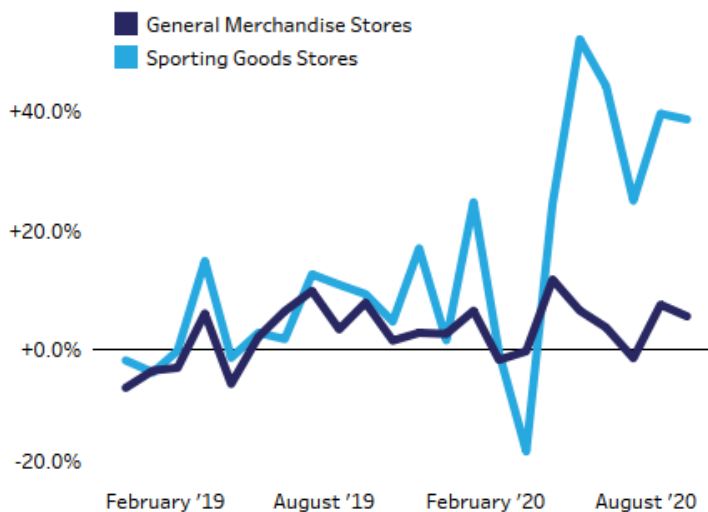
Source: Department of Natural Resources

\* Sales are to non-residents only since residents only need to properly register their vehicle.

- After three roughly stable years, the Ice Age Trail Alliance saw membership as of Jan. 2021 rise by 53.2% over the previous year.
- During the peak months of April through October, the Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway saw total visits increase by 25.3% --



**Figure 5: State Sporting Goods Stores See Surge in Sales**  
Year-over-year change in sales and use tax collections by month in 2019-2020



Source: Department of Revenue

from 633,264 visits in 2019 to 793,510 visits in 2020. Part of this may be attributable to a 60.1% increase in anglers in the area from 31,315 in 2019 to 50,133 in 2020.

Not every green space in the state saw an increase, however. For instance, preliminary data show visits to the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore during the same peak months dropped 12.8% from just under 230,000 in 2019 to just under 200,000 in 2020. A large reason for this may be a substantial decline in visitors to the islands themselves, as island camping was suspended and lighthouses and visitor centers were closed because of the pandemic.

One natural question is whether examples that show an increase in outdoor activities will last beyond the eventual fade of COVID-19. Time will provide the ultimate answer, but in the meantime the state's sales tax collections might provide a modest clue.

### CONSUMER PURCHASES HINT AT LASTING IMPACTS

The Department of Revenue (DOR) provided data on sales and use tax collections by month as reported to the state by both sporting goods stores and general merchandise stores. For most of 2019, growth in monthly sales tax collections over the same month in the prior year did not diverge widely in the two retail segments.

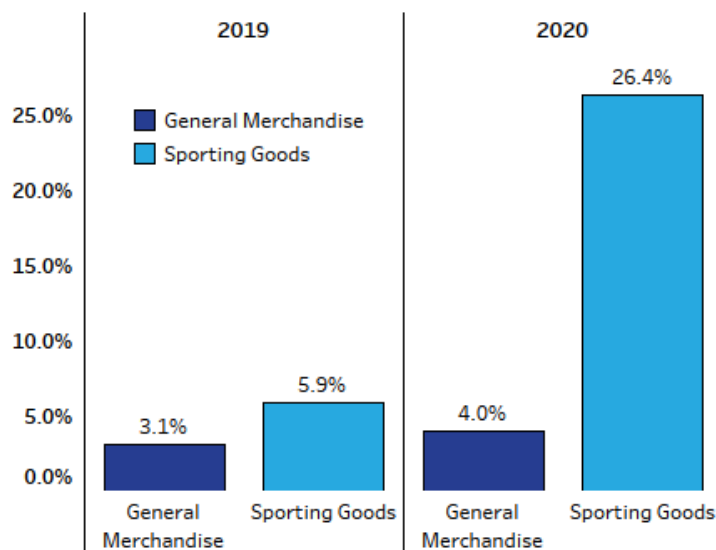
Yet, as Figure 5 shows, after a 17.2% drop from the prior year for collections from sporting goods stores in April 2020, those stores and general merchandise stores diverged sharply, with sporting goods purchases rebounding at a much faster pace.

Since Gov. Tony Evers' stay-at-home order classified establishments selling guns and ammunition as essential businesses and allowed them to remain open, the April drop in sporting goods sales may have reflected the decision by many consumers to hunker down and hit pause on unnecessary purchases. Over the following months, reported collections by sporting goods stores rose sharply over the prior year and outpaced general merchandise stores (see Figure 6).

At roughly \$160 million in additional taxable sales statewide over the prior year, these extra sales are not substantial on a per person basis and much of them likely went to exercise and sports equipment that would not be used in the outdoors. Still, Wisconsin consumers who bought products like fishing poles, kayaks, or tents might be in a better position to pursue and stick with a new outdoor pursuit because of their purchase.

National data on the federal excise taxes collected on fishing, boating, hunting, and shooting products back up that possibility. Manufacturers, producers, and importers pay these excise taxes, which in turn go to state fish and wildlife agencies to use to help their wildlife and conservation efforts.

**Fig. 6: Sporting Goods Sales Outstrip General Merchandise**  
% change in sales & use tax collections, March through Oct.



Source: Department of Revenue



Figures from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided by Southwick Associates show that federal excise tax revenues on sportfishing equipment such as rods, tackle boxes, and motorboat fuel increased 68.8% in 2020 over 2019. Meanwhile, excise tax collections on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment increased 31.1% in 2020. While most of these increases clearly seem linked to greater outdoor activity, some caution is in order in interpreting the firearm sale data, as news outlets have widely attributed that increase at least in part to concerns around the pandemic and political unrest.

Overall, these data hold out at least the strong possibility that additional time spent in the outdoors may have given state residents a positive outlet during the difficulties of the pandemic and that some of that activity might outlast concerns over COVID-19.

## FUNDING FOR PUBLIC LANDS AND SPACES

Given that the upsurge in outdoor recreation occurs at a time when state and local governments also are facing financial challenges, we next consider state and local funding for these activities.

### State spending on parks

As it turns out, Census Bureau data show Wisconsin ranks in the bottom half of states for parks and recreation spending overall and second to last for spending at the state level. In our recent [“Dollar for Dollar” report](#) on local and state spending, we found that 2017 per capita state operating spending on parks and recreation in Wisconsin ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the country, ahead of only Alabama.

More recent – and slightly different – data from the [National Association of State Park Directors \(NASPD\)](#) show that despite more than three state park visits per capita (19<sup>th</sup> overall), Wisconsin’s state government spends just \$3.67 on its state park operations per capita – 48<sup>th</sup> in the country (above only Arizona and Texas). The state’s \$135 per acre in operating spending and \$32 per acre in capital spending also are far below nationwide averages of \$154 and \$57, respectively. As a result, Wisconsin spends just \$1.20 in state park operations per visitor – the second-lowest amount of any state in the country.

In the 2015-17 state budget, the state cut \$4.7 million in state tax funding out of the parks system – nearly 28% of the parks budget at that time. Most but not all of that was restored through an estimated \$3.2 million increase in fees on parks users – creating a \$1.4 million budget shortfall within the parks system at the time, according to DNR and LFB reports.

The changes completed an erosion in tax funding for state parks that goes back to 1995, when the state eliminated the requirement that state parks operations be funded equally from the parks account and the general fund, according to LFB. The Legislature followed up in 2017 with additional though more limited fee increases for parks.

The uptick in outdoor pursuits has led the DNR to request budget increases to support state and local ATV trails. The state may also wish to consider additional policies and programming to help keep the surge of new anglers and hunters engaged in those sports – the Forum mentioned some options in a [2018 brief](#). Doing so could boost long-term funding for conservation programs.

### Local parks spending

DOR figures show that between 2000 and 2018, increases in spending for parks and recreation by counties and municipalities in Wisconsin have modestly outpaced the rise in their overall operating and capital spending (excluding debt payments). As a result, the share of local government spending going to parks and recreation grew slightly over that period.

In the case of counties, the 46.4% increase in parks and recreation spending since 2000 was only slightly greater than the rate of inflation. In the case of municipalities, the 60.9% increase in parks and recreation spending was greater.

Moving forward, much of what happens with spending on parks operations in Wisconsin likely will depend on local government finances and priorities since they shoulder most of that responsibility in this state.

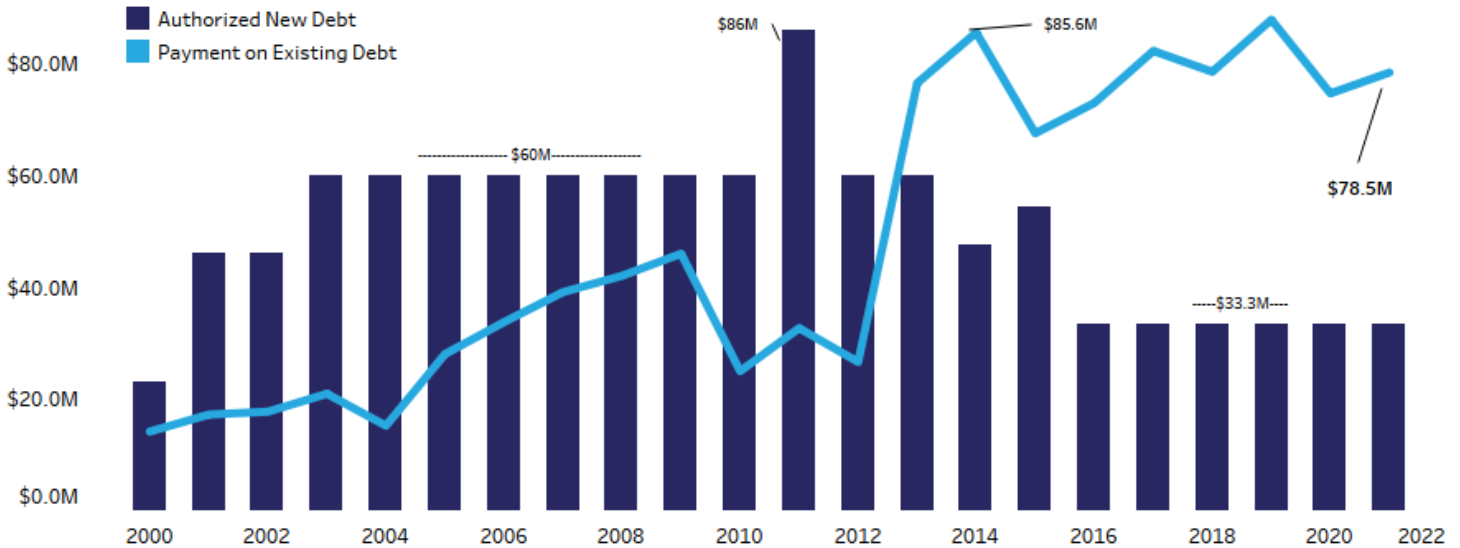
### Expanding and improving public lands

Most of the figures cited above do not include capital spending for land purchases or facilities. The state plays a significant role in this area through the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program, which uses bonding to finance state and local land purchases for public



**Figure 7: New Borrowing Has Fallen as Debt Payments Remain Elevated**

New stewardship debt authorizations and debt payments in millions



Source: Legislative Fiscal Bureau

recreation and environmental conservation as well as improvements on public lands.

The Stewardship program is once again at a crossroads. After providing only a two-year extension in the 2019-21 budget, lawmakers and Evers must again decide whether and how to reauthorize the program, which is currently set to expire on June 30, 2022.

In his 2021-23 budget bill, Evers is proposing to more than double the authorized borrowing for the Stewardship program to \$70 million per year and then shift how that funding is divvied up. Under the legislation, the funds for helping local communities with purchases and projects and for making improvements on state lands would grow substantially while those for state land purchases would not.

In 2019, the Forum [examined the Stewardship program](#) and found it facing several key financial challenges. Almost all of them still stand:

- The annual allotment for borrowing is still at \$33.3 million a year, down 61.3% from its 2011 peak without accounting for inflation, according to LFB figures (see Figure 7). Actual spending has been even lower in four of the past five years.
- The \$9.6 million spent in 2020 on land purchases was second only to 2018 as the smallest in the program’s history. Overall

spending was up substantially to \$52.5 million in 2020 but a significant share of that was linked to specific projects that were directed by lawmakers and are now winding down.

- Stewardship debt payments are down from their 2019 peak but remain well above their levels of a decade ago.

The rise in overall program spending reflects debt associated in part with the more than 863,000 acres that have been purchased and protected by the DNR since 1990, as the Stewardship program has been the single largest source of funding for those acquisitions over that time. Though it can be costly, much of this land is owned outright by the state, lasts longer than other capital investments such as roads, and can appreciate in value. Funds have also gone to many development projects as well as local land purchases.

In addition, these lands have provided outdoor recreation as well as environmental benefits, which lie beyond the scope of this report but are substantial in areas such as biodiversity and flood mitigation. The Stewardship program helps the public access and enjoy these lands by helping fund construction or renovation projects such as parks, trails, piers, and harbors.

The program allows the state to borrow money for DNR land purchases, typically through 20-year general obligation bonds. Borrowed funds also are used by DNR to award grants to local governments and nonprofit



organizations for conservation or recreation purposes, generally for up to 50% of the cost of the proposed spending. In other words, these state grants draw substantial matching dollars.

Over the past five years, local governments submitted roughly 2.5 times as many applications for grants as were actually awarded. For a look at properties statewide, explore this interactive table or [this interactive map](#) created by Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts.

### New Funding Options

Since the onset of COVID-19, the state has experienced both declines or slower growth in key revenue streams such as income and sales taxes, as well as higher expenditures on needs such as public health programs, personal protective equipment, and social services. As the [Forum has documented](#), local governments have had steadier revenues from the property tax, but like the state they have experienced some higher costs as well as lost revenues in areas such as county sales taxes, municipal room taxes, parking fees and fines, and investment income.

Since Wisconsin parks are primarily a local service, state policymakers could factor in those needs as they debate larger questions such as state aid payments to local governments and state limits on local property taxes. One question to consider is whether parks and public spaces could suffer more in low-income communities or those communities particularly affected by the pandemic.

Both state and local officials could look for ways to economize through encouraging more collaboration across local governments to provide adequate parks and amenities. They could also look at ways to enhance state and local revenues for parks.

At the state level, a 2016 DNR report offered revenue options such as imposing greater fees at high-demand parks and electrifying more campsites and then charging for them – steps that since then have been taken to some degree. Other proposals included expanding the amount of privately-run indoor lodging such as simple cabins for parks visitors and allowing more sponsorships and advertisements. These steps could combine for \$2 to \$3 million per year in additional parks revenue but might be seen by some as antithetical to the idea of a rustic public park.

A larger change (projected to raise more than \$15 million a year) would be to replace vehicle admission sticker and state trail passes with individual park admission passes. Alternatively, the state could let motorists buy a state parks sticker when renewing their vehicle registration – automatic renewal of a \$15 annual sticker (about half the current price) could raise from \$7 to 14 million if many more people subscribed and the rates reached 12% to 24% of motorists.

In Minnesota, [voters in 2008 passed](#) a sales tax of 0.375% to fund priorities that include restoring and protecting habitat for wildlife, helping fund parks and trails, ensuring clean water, and supporting the arts. The state also puts 40% of its lottery proceeds into conservation projects and funding.

A similar approach could be considered in Wisconsin but would have to be balanced against the effect on taxpayers and other priorities – for example, some local governments have sought and Evers has proposed a higher local sales tax to fund a variety of services, not just parks.

Another avenue for state and local collaboration is the Stewardship program itself. Since the program is financed through borrowing, the effect of new land purchases or projects on the state's budget is limited to the future increase in debt service costs that would be needed to pay off the bonds.

Given the low current interest rates and the time it takes to carry out land purchases and construction projects, increasing program spending and borrowing in 2023 would have little effect during this current period of pandemic-induced financial strain. The Forum has documented the capital needs of local parks systems such as the huge challenges faced by Milwaukee County. The Stewardship program could represent one vehicle for the state to assist local governments in that task and in other areas such as conserving environmentally sensitive areas.

However, the costs over time remain substantial. In 2019, LFB calculated that 10 years of Stewardship borrowing at even the current level would cost approximately \$533.6 million in principal and interest at an assumed rate of 5%. Approving 10 years of program borrowing at \$46 million annually – still far below the program's peak funding – would entail total debt payments of \$738.2 million, LFB calculates.



## CONCLUSION

Just as COVID-19 disrupted workplaces and the economy, it also reshaped the leisure hours of Wisconsin residents, sending them outdoors in greater numbers than at any point in recent years. While it is uncertain whether this trend will continue after the pandemic eases, it provides important perspective for state lawmakers as they prepare to debate the next state budget and for local officials as they balance their own competing priorities.

At a minimum, recent events are a reminder of the ongoing value of green spaces and public lands to an increasingly urbanized population. While the pandemic has uncovered or exacerbated a host of challenges for the state, many also will see Wisconsinites' increased time in the outdoors as a positive development, and one that policymakers may wish to support through new investment or policy initiatives. Whether in promoting mental health or enhancing efforts to rebuild Wisconsin's tourism economy, public lands and time outdoors have a potential role to play in helping the state recover and thrive.

