

- SUBJECT:** Waiving state park entrance fees for first responders and veterans
- COMMITTEE:** Culture, Recreation and Tourism — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 8 ayes — K. King, Gervin-Hawkins, Burns, Clardy, Frullo, Krause, Martinez, C. Morales
- 1 nay — Israel
- WITNESSES:** For — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Jennifer Szimanski, CLEAT; J Pete Laney, State Firefighters' & Fire Marshals' Association; Monty Wynn, Texas Municipal League; Mitch Landry, Texas Municipal Police Association; Ron Hinkle, Texas Travel Alliance; Jason Vaughn, Texas Young Republicans; James Babb; Frank Holman; Thomas Parkinson)
- Against — John Shepperd, Texas Foundation for Conservation
- On — Justin Halvorsen, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
- BACKGROUND:** Parks and Wildlife Code sec. 13.018 establishes the state parklands passport program. Under this section, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department may waive or reduce a park entrance fee for passport holders. Persons who may apply for a passport include seniors who reside in the state, certain veterans with service-connected disabilities, and individuals who have certain physical or mental impairments.
- DIGEST:** HB 1341 would require the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) to waive the state park entrance fee for a Texas resident who was a first responder. "First responder" would mean certain firefighters, emergency medical services personnel, municipal police officers, and sheriffs and constables and their deputies.
- The bill also would include among the persons authorized to apply to TPWD for a state parklands passport all active duty members or veterans of the U.S. armed services, the Texas Army National Guard, the Texas Air National Guard, or the Texas State Guard.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2021.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

HB 1341 would enable the state to make a gesture of appreciation to active duty members of the military, veterans, and first responders. Waiving entrance fees to state parks for these groups would provide them with important benefits and not create an undue financial burden for the state. Allowing veterans and active duty service members free entrance to national parks has been a longstanding federal policy and should be replicated at the state level.

HB 1341 would recognize and honor individuals who have put their lives on the line for the public's benefit. In addition, first responders, active duty military, and veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health concerns at a higher rate than the general population as a result of their service and have expressed how a visit to a state park can be a cathartic and healing experience. The opportunity to thank these individuals and potentially improve their mental health outcomes is worth a potential cost to the state.

Despite the fee waivers, it is possible that the bill could create a net positive financial impact for the state. Many whose entrance fee would be waived when they visited a park could be accompanied by friends and family who would not receive a waiver. These group outings could result in an overall higher level of park attendance and cover or substantially mitigate the financial impact of entrance fee waivers.

A general revenue appropriation in anticipation of lost revenue from another fund would not be an appropriate solution for any financial impact the bill could create. The bill makes no appropriation from the state parks account, and the related fiscal note accounts only for potential lost revenue based on estimates of visitors who would be eligible for fee waivers. While uncertainty about the specific fiscal impact of the bill persists, it would be inappropriate to dedicate state funds to replace potential lost revenue based solely on guesswork.

CRITICS
SAY:

HB 1341 would fail to achieve its purpose of making a gesture of thanks on behalf of all Texans and risks doing harm to the operations of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) that would outweigh the minor benefit given to the individuals covered by the bill. The waiving of state park entrance fees under the bill would represent a relatively small benefit to the groups covered by the bill because park entrance fees are only a small cost on the individual level. Waiving a large number of these fees, however, could have a significant impact on the ability of TPWD to finance its operations.

In addition, while the bill intends to provide a gesture of appreciation on behalf of all Texans, the cost would be borne only by those who pay into the state parks account. This account consists of revenue from entrance fees and other activity fees paid to state parks. Rather than allowing the state parks account to bear the full cost of lost revenue from waived entrance fees, money should be appropriated from general revenue to reflect the intent of the bill to provide a statewide token of appreciation.

OTHER
CRITICS
SAY:

State parks are a natural resource that should be shared equally by all Texans. Carving out special classes of Texans to receive preferential treatment at state parks would be discriminatory and not reflect the principles of equality that should govern access to shared resources.

NOTES:

According to the Legislative Budget Board, the bill would have a negative impact of about \$4.3 million to the state parks account through fiscal 2022-23.