

PUBLIC PARKS AND RECREATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Texas contains some of the most diverse public lands in the country, including 14 national parks and 88 state parks, covering 630,000-plus acres that showcase natural treasures, numerous county and city parks, and many community public green spaces. The Texas State Park System's funding includes multiple allocations and appropriations passed by the Texas Legislature. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) is the state agency whose mission is to manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas and to provide hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation opportunities for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The TPWD Fiscal Year 2021 budget is \$444.6 million. These funds are required to adequately operate, maintain, and protect parks. Unfortunately, history shows funding is all too often diverted. Texans, however, passed Proposition 5 in 2019, ensuring that 100% of sporting goods sales tax helps fund TPWD and the Texas Historical Commission (THC). Parks and green spaces energize communities and serve as retreat venues, creating memories and enjoyment of the outdoors. State parks serve as emergency shelters during crisis events, such as hurricanes and floods. Parks also preserve scenic natural treasures and conserve wildlife and their habitats, while allowing the public to enjoy recreational resources. With over 96% of Texas land privately owned, counties and cities depend upon donations to acquire properties and designate it for public use. Proposition 5 funding will help secure the future of local parks, state parks, and historic sites for generations to come. Dedicated park funding is extremely important given the \$800 million remaining in deferred maintenance projects.

CONDITION AND CAPACITY

State parks let us experience nature and preserve Texas history. Texas parks and historical sites include:

- **14** National Parks with 5,569,993 Visitors
- **120*** State parks, historical sites, and natural areas (*operated by both TPWD & THC)
- **45** National Historical Landmarks
- **3,800+** Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks

Texas is a big state! When it comes to exploring Texas' historic and cultural treasures, the state is divided into 10 heritage trail regions (with major communities) as part of the THC's Texas Heritage Trails Program:

- **Brazos Trail Region:** Waco, Bryan, College Station
- **Forest Trail Region:** Beaumont, Nacogdoches, Tyler
- **Forts Trail Region:** Abilene, San Angelo
- **Hill Country Trail Region:** San Antonio, Austin, Uvalde
- **Independence Trail Region:** San Antonio, Houston, Victoria
- **Lakes Trail Region:** Dallas, Fort Worth, Wichita Falls
- **Mountain Trail Region:** El Paso, Van Horn, Alpine
- **Pecos Trail Region:** Midland, Odessa, Del Rio
- **Plains Trail Region:** Amarillo, Lubbock, Big Spring
- **Tropical Trails Region:** Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Laredo

County and city parks are owned and administrated by the public under the stewardship of elected officials. Over 96% of Texas, however, is privately owned, requiring counties and cities to depend on private landowners or the financial generosity of the public to acquire land and designate it for public use.

FUNDING

State Parks Funding

The state parks funding is 30.4% of the TPWD FY 2021 \$444.5 total budget, and has multiple allocations and appropriations passed by the Texas Legislature.

Unfortunately, on many occasions parks funding is diverted elsewhere. The TPWD FY2021 budget consists of funding sources that include general revenue funds, special funds, bonds, federal funds, foundations, and grants.

- The General Revenue Fund, or Fund 1; funding consists largely of allocations of sporting goods sales tax; used to fund state and local park-related needs
- Special Fund 9 (Game, Fish and Water Safety) and Fund 64 (State Parks) are the largest contributors; most of Fund 9 allocation is due to the revenue of license, permits, fees, and leases
- Federal funding – apportionments, grants, and contracts
- The remaining budget is made up of other organizations and foundations

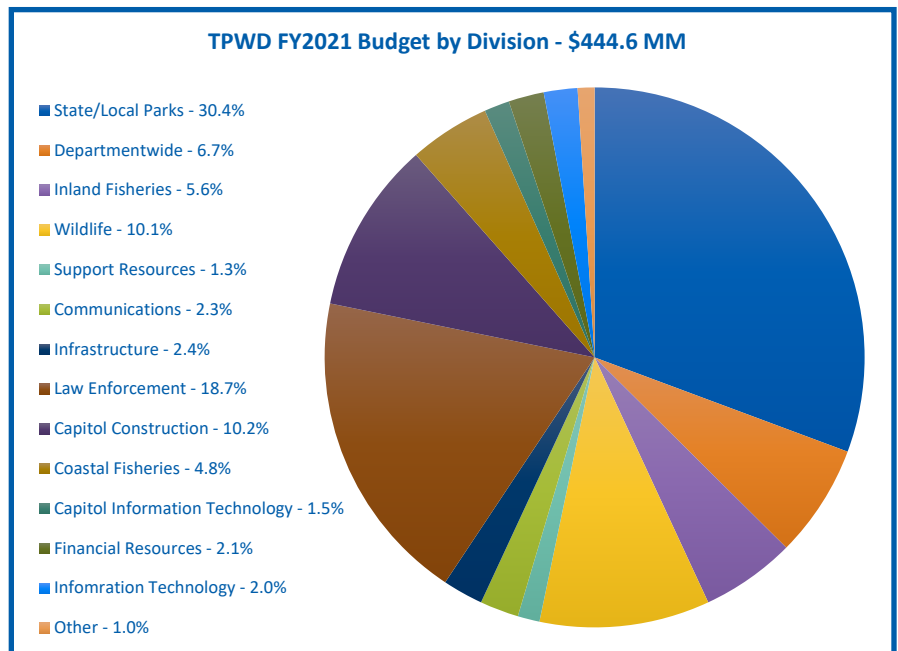


FIGURE 19. TPWD FY2021 budget by division.

Many of these allocation sources are anticipated values that may not be truly feasible since the funds are based on user fees and taxes. Budget shortfalls exist, and the Texas State Park System experiences demand increase and aging facilities which lead to increased operation and maintenance and improvement costs.

Municipal/County Funding

With growing populations, many Texas municipalities and counties are experiencing increased park demand to serve the public. Increased costs and budget shortfalls persist. Certain municipalities and counties have successfully passed bond programs to fund park expansions and improvement projects. These programs help assist in expanding and improving parks but do not contribute to their operations and maintenance budgets, which come from multiple sources such as general budgets, user fees, grants, and state and federal assistance. Even with the benefits these programs provide, many Texas municipalities and counties are seeing difficulties in funding operations and maintenance costs as demand increases and tax revenues are allocated elsewhere.

FUTURE NEED

Greater need exists to offer Texas residents well-planned parks and green spaces designed and constructed with sustainable infrastructure to provide meaningful outdoor experiences. The passage of State Proposition 5 will provide a reliable and sustained source of funding—**without increasing taxes.**

Numerous repair and improvement projects at Texas State Parks have been and are being funded due to the “Sporting Goods Sales Tax”. Examples include:

- Replacing outmoded utility systems and restrooms at many parks (Garner, Caddo Lake and more)
- Repairing roads, dams (Huntsville) and buildings damaged by wildfires (Bastrop) and flooding (Galveston, Goose Island)

And there still is \$800 million remaining in deferred maintenance projects that needs to be addressed in the future based on a capital construction plan created at the request of the State Legislature in September 2018.

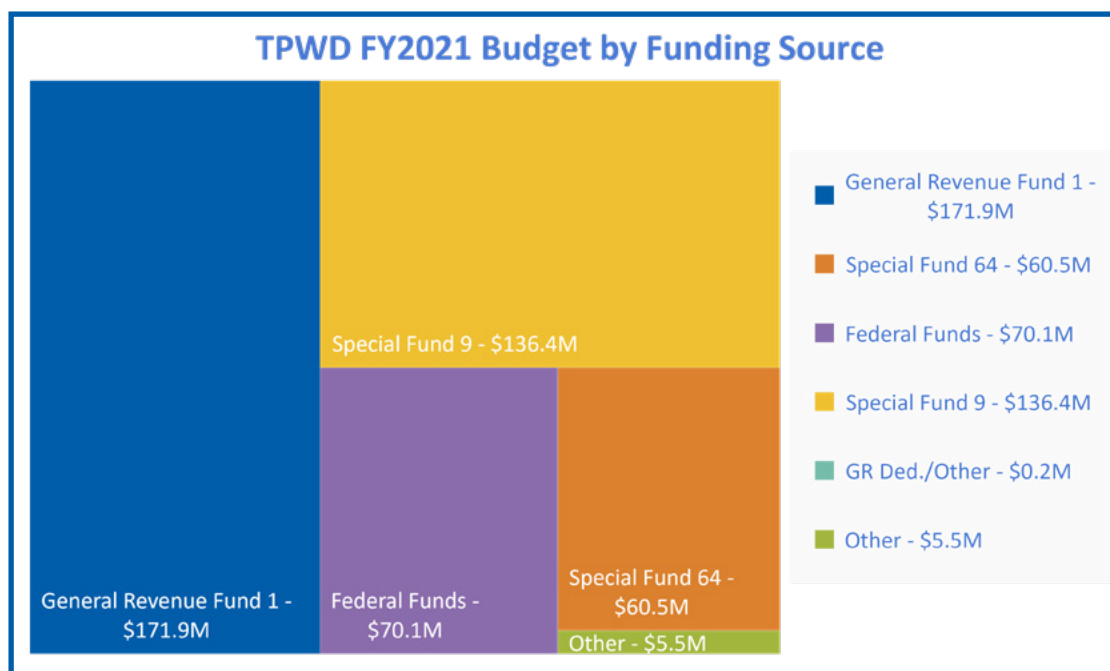


FIGURE 20. TPWD FY2021 budget by funding source.

OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE

Texas municipalities are in the process of creating, implementing, and/or revising strategic plans for their parks and recreation departments; with various programs and initiatives to repair, replace, and renovate public parks, facilities, and trails. A strong volunteer presence throughout also saves considerable time and funding for local governments while providing a sense of unity and ownership as residents clean, operate and repair within their capacity. While the strategic plans for improvements are progressive and community involvement in the operation and longevity of parks is critical, there are still noticeable gaps in the number of rehabilitation projects that are proposed but remain unfunded.

Within the TPWD, there has been success in the public's opinion on the day-to-day operations and maintenance as well as annual goals for minor and major repairs achieved. However, only approximately 18% of the funds required for the estimated \$185M in backlogged maintenance, as noted by the TPWD, have been appropriated through FY2023. With pressing unmet maintenance needs, collaboration in the form of sharing equipment and staff expertise between TPWD and THC has occurred.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Access to parks and outdoor recreation improves quality of life for all Texans. More time spent in parks and green spaces can help individuals combat mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress. In contrast, urban areas without parks and vegetation can negatively impact communities by increasing air pollution levels and urban-heat effect related illnesses and mortality. The 2018 Texas Outdoor Recreation Plan (TORP) recognizes that obesity and healthcare costs are on the rise statewide, partially due to an increasingly “indoor” culture. Well maintained parks and outdoor recreation are critical in helping individuals fight against the mental and physical health issues that Texas faces.

Texas State and National Parks protect much of the clean water on which the public relies. As Texas' population continues to grow, investment in nature-based infrastructure and conservation of parkland can help conserve and protect drinking water for our communities, economies, and environment.



PHOTO: BLUEBONNETS IN BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK, TPWD

RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION

Public agencies, community developers, and non-profit organizations are tuned into development of resilience plans for parks and greenspaces that includes steps to educate communities regarding their role to prepare for and minimize the short- and long-term risks caused by natural and man-made disasters as well as sustaining a healthier community.

An approach to achieve urban resilience is to encourage the creation of nature-based infrastructure. This approach increases permeable surfaces for greater soil infiltration, which results in a longer time and a decreased amount of flow to reach the storm drainage system.

Nature-based infrastructure includes:

- Rain gardens
- Green roofs
- Permeable surfaces
- Rainwater harvesting
- Detention basin systems

Nature-based infrastructure in parks help minimize the effects of climate changes due to extreme high temperatures and low moisture levels in the air. Effects include:

- Increased mean sea level elevations
- Recurrent storm events for prolonged periods of time
- Extreme drought conditions
- Wildfires within open lands

Nature-based infrastructure benefits include:

- Minimized flooding resulting from rainfall absorption (50 - 90 %) for storm events with lower intensities
- Replenished aquifers resulting from rainfall infiltration into soils
- Reduction of urban heat effect by the absorption of heat by green spaces in cities during the summer which results in reduced temperatures (10-15o F)
- Captured carbon dioxide by trees and green roofs
- Reduced risk of toxic algae blooms resulting from filtered pollutants which decrease the amount of nutrient laden runoff that enters waterways
- Increased aesthetics added by greenspaces which add value to the communities by improving the quality of life
- Improved water quality and mitigation of floods

The redesign and rehabilitation of parks and green spaces should be focused on the human centric nature of our communities. Post disaster events (e.g. hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, etc.), communities and public agencies should seize opportunities to restore, rebuild and improve neighborhood parks and green spaces. Communities are well served when agencies maximize these opportunities to re-think the land plan and enhance the affected neighborhood with considerations for development or improvement of parks and green spaces.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO RAISE THE GRADE

- **Collaborative Partnerships.** Identify other state programs and partners with similar missions and goals to increase exposure for potential fund grant award opportunities
- **Buy Texas Sporting Goods Advocacy.** Advocate for individuals and groups (e.g. sporting leagues, schools, recreational facilities, etc.) to buy sporting goods in Texas; the state sales taxes collected on those goods help to build new parks and improve and repair existing parks
- **Corporate Sponsorships.** Offer corporate partners an opportunity to support the communities by sponsoring park programs (e.g. nature learning focused on flora and fauna), park events (e.g. health expos, fun-runs, etc.), or infrastructure (e.g. trails, building structures, ponds, etc.)
- **Focus Resilience and Innovation.** Focus on nature based infrastructure will raise the grade by enhancing the Texas environment by supporting minimization of flooding, replenishment of aquifers, reduction of the urban heat effect, capture of carbon dioxide, reduction of the risk of toxic algae blooms in lakes and rivers, increased aesthetics, and improved water quality throughout Texas.

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