Testimony of Dennis L. Schornack, Executive Director
Michigan Recreation and Park Association
to the
House Committee on the Great Lakes and Environment

The Michigan Recreation and Park Association testified in support of the State Park Passport proposal at the joint hearing on April 1, 2009. Subsequently, our public policy committee and board of directors have discussed the proposal in detail, and as a result of those discussions, I wish to address two issues.

State and local parks are complementary public assets, frequently contiguous or even interconnected by trails - what I like to think of as "linear parks." Professionals in both systems consider themselves colleagues who advocate for common causes like outdoor recreation and resource conservation.

The two issues I wish to address are:

First, like state parks, a few county parks (e.g., Oakland and Ottawa) charge entry fees and rely upon fee revenues to help fund park operations and maintenance. These county parks are also in close proximity to state parks. If the Passport proposal passes and entry fees to nearby state parks are eliminated, leaders of these parks are concerned that day users will shift their preference to state parks to avoid daily entry fees, and thereby reduce county park revenues.

Local park and recreation professionals would rather collaborate with their state park colleagues than compete for scarce resources. So, we wish to work with you to find a way to hold the few parks that charge entry fees harmless from the unintended consequences that may arise from the bills.

Adding an enforcement provision to ensure that only people who pay the Recreation Passport Fee are admitted to state parks would help to avoid the consequence of "free riders" shifting from local to state parks for day use. A quick and easy enforcement mechanism such as a license plate sticker would make enforcement efficient.

Second, we wish to address the issue of whether the Recreation Passport Fee is one that vehicle owners can "opt-out" of paying, or "opt-in" to pay. The difference is significant in that the "opt-out" provision will greatly increase participation and revenues. The Montana model makes this clear.

State parks, forests, and natural areas provide benefits to every Michigan citizen, whether they use these natural assets or not. Waters that flow into the Great Lakes are filtered and cleansed, carbon is sequestered, species diversity is sustained, and the opportunity to enjoy outdoor recreation is always available. These benefits are general

benefits that justify general fund support, but as we know, general fund support for state parks was eliminated in 2004.

We support retaining the "opt-out" approach to the Recreation Passport Fee because it will more closely approximate general fund support of state parks and forests. We believe that it is safe to assume that most Michigan citizens support their state parks and forests, after all, they acquiesced to this use of their general tax dollars for decades without protest. If, after all of these years, people wish to protest paying for these public assets, then they can do so by signing a statement to that effect and having the fee deducted from their vehicle registration bill.

Thank you, I would be happy to take any questions.