

THE BOND BUYER

EDA approves up to \$80M in bonds for W.Va. state parks improvements

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Facilities at West Virginia's state parks and forests are set to receive a thorough shine-up through up to \$80 million in bonds authorized Thursday by the state Economic Development Authority.

At its monthly meeting, the EDA approved a resolution to issue excess lottery revenue bonds for the state Division of Natural Resources. The agency will use the bonds — issued in one or more series and not to exceed \$80 million — for various improvement projects at state parks and recreational areas of state forests, with a focus on infrastructure.

"This is a significant step forward for state parks," Sam England, chief of West Virginia State Parks, said at the meeting.

The DNR estimates the projects will cost about \$60 million to complete, according to a news release from Gov. Jim Justice's office. The bonds are expected to be available by the end of September, per the release.

About \$25 million to \$30 million in bonds will bolster "behind-the-scenes" work, such as structural facility repairs and infrastructure for water supply and wastewater, England said.

But plenty of improvements will be visible to parkgoers, like redecorating cabins and lodge rooms "that have not had the attention they need to have," England said.

The approved resolution said the bonds could also help with replacement and repair "due to major structural failure concerns" through projects that could

encompass Hawks Nest State Park, Pipestem Resort State Park and Twin Falls State Park.

The buildings are safe but deteriorating, England said. Design flaws have caused water to leak into structural spaces, he said.

"We got to go in there and shore up those components to make sure they stay with us for a long time, or we replace them," he said.

According to the resolution, projects financed through the bonds may also go toward:

- Improvements and repairs to new and existing recreation facilities
- Providing Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility needs for certain visitor centers, campgrounds, restrooms and other facilities at state parks and forests
- Electrical service upgrades and replacements
- Buying internet connectivity equipment to be purchased for the State Parks system at certain locations.

A wide range of state parks and state forests are mentioned in parts of the resolution, including Kanawha State Forest, Greenbrier State Forest, Cacapon Resort State Park, Beech Fork State Park, Stonewall Jackson Resort State Park and Chief Logan State Park.

"Every one of West Virginia's 35 state parks, seven state forests and two rail trails will see improvements from this bond sale," the Governor's Office news release said.

The EDA, according to the resolution, anticipates the DNR may expend funds from the State Park Improvement Fund to pay for preliminary costs of the projects.

The bonds mature no later than 30 years from the date of issuance, according to the resolution. The majority of the projects, however, are expected to be completed within three years, England said.

The improvements will not only address needs, but also help tourism efforts, public perception of the parks system and the activity nearby communities see, according to England.

"We've been working for quite some time to figure out a solution, and we believe that this is going to be impactful," he said.

In other news, the EDA also gave final approval for a \$6 million loan on a 10-year term to West Virginia Great Barrel Co. The Greenbrier County-based whiskey barrel-making company had originally applied for a loan in 2017, but holdups regarding financing have delayed the proceedings.

A part-owner of Great Barrel, James Philip Cornett, had filed for personal and corporate bankruptcy and faced allegations of fraud -- which were never proven -- in bankruptcy court, the Gazette-Mail reported in November. The EDA has maintained that Cornett doesn't have enough of an ownership stake to sway the loan decision one way or the other.

Also Thursday, the EDA:

- Gave final approval for a \$1 million loan to Touchstone Testing Laboratory, which will use the loan for a building lease in Jackson County.
- Gave preliminary approval for loans to the Randolph County Development Authority (\$1.8 million), Barbour County's Delta Cooling Towers (\$1.35 million) and Putnam County's Tasty Blend Foods (\$1 million) to financing building expansions and land/equipment purchases.
- Approved loan insurance of \$280,000 to Poca Valley Bank, which is loaning money for a Jersey Mike's Subs franchise to purchase equipment. The franchise will be in Charleston's Dudley Farms Plaza.