

These cuts – and cuts to funding for our state's education system – come as we seek to attract high-paying businesses. McCrory's 2015-17 budget gives \$99 million in new appropriations to the Department of Commerce to recruit businesses and jobs. However, McCrory and the General Assembly continue to ignore what UNC System President William Friday and Govs. Jim Hunt, Jim Holshouser and Jim Martin taught us long ago: Educational opportunity at all levels and quality of life – as demonstrated by parks, greenways and beaches – are among the most important factors in attracting businesses and investment.

Over the years, I have visited each of our more than 40 state parks from Gorges' State Park in our southwestern mountains to Jockey's Ridge State Park on the Outer Banks. I am always amazed at the skill and ded-

dication of the women and men who serve as park rangers and park employees. These public servants wear many hats: teacher, naturalist, emergency medical responder, engineer (constructing trails and bridges), maintenance and sanitation worker, and law enforcement officer.

Surely, McCrory and his experts at NC GEAR cannot expect remaining park personnel to collect gate fees, issue parking citations and sell more T-shirts to fill the coming \$7.1 million hole.

I hope McCrory will reread his speech and reflect on why parks are indicators of quality of life in North Carolina. He should remember that most kids from his generation grew up on farms and in small towns where the natural world was only a few steps away. Today, with our state's growing urban footprint, state parks often provide the best, and only, opportunity for children to experience forest, stream and field.

Our state parks were built by visionaries who saved the best of North Carolina's landscape piece by piece. To charge admission or to place unreasonable restrictions to access to these magnificent places would be a betrayal to those who made our parks possible, but even more so it would be a betrayal to future generations.

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MICAH INTRATOR - AP

Lakes Jocassee and Keowee are seen from an overlook at Gorges State Park near Sapphire, N.C.

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N.C. PARKS AT 100

A missed opportunity

BY TOM EARNHARDT

This month, North Carolina passed a major milestone: the 100th anniversary of the legislation creating our state parks system. To mark the occasion, I attended a low-key ceremony at Umstead State Park in Raleigh where Gov. Pat McCrory eloquently described our 40 state parks as indicators of our quality of life and explained why "parks are important to people who are struggling."

Apparently, the governor's budget writers missed the speech. Two days later, McCrory released his budget, which proposes cutting appropriations for the parks' operating budget by up to \$3.3 million for 2015-16 and a whopping \$7.1 million for fiscal year 2016-17.

With current appropriations for state parks at \$29.7 million, the proposed reduction in 2016-17 represents an almost 24 percent cut. Such a crippling reduction would compound the effect of cuts of more than \$10.5 million – and the elimination of 60 park staff positions – in recent years. Additional millions for state parks, local

parks and beach access have also disappeared as the governor and General Assembly have gutted the dedicated revenue for the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.

These funding reductions occurred while the number of visitors to state parks increased from 14.2 million in 2011 to 15.6 million in 2014. All North Carolinians understand the need for cost cutting and greater efficiency during an economic downturn, but such debilitating cuts have long since passed from reductions for the sake of "efficiency" to cuts for the sake of political philosophy.

In 2013, McCrory created NC Government Efficiency and Reform or NC GEAR "to develop a strategic transformation plan for North Carolina." The efficiency gurus at NC GEAR like to describe our state parks, museums and historic sites as "attractions" – just like water parks, amusement rides and sports arenas. Apparently, NC GEAR intends to replace reduced appropriations with the "implementation of new strategies for pricing, marketing and donor development."

While we should applaud efficiency and innovative funding programs, the NC GEAR cost-cutters fail to comprehend that North Carolina state parks are part of a philosophy of education, recreation and conservation. Park lands from our mountains to the Outer Banks were fought for, donated and built over 100 years by volunteers, corporations, land trusts and communities. Most of these contributors of time and treasure expected our parks to remain accessible and free to residents and our visitors.

Point of View