

SB 13 Minutes – Monday, March 31, 2011

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SB 13-WAIVE PARK FEE FOR DISABLED VETERANS

CO-CHAIR WAGONER announced SB 13 to be up for consideration. He asked for a motion to bring the bill before the committee.

CO-CHAIR PASKVAN moved to bring SB 13, version 27-LS0097\A, before the committee.

CO-CHAIR WAGONER objected for discussion purposes.

SENATOR FRENCH, sponsor of SB 13, said this measure waives park fees for disabled veterans. He read the sponsor statement as follows:

Alaska's veterans served our country with pride. This legislation shows a small token of our appreciation by providing disabled veterans in our state with free access to state park facilities.

Our parks provide all Alaskans with the opportunity to explore and recreate in Alaska's wild places. To provide these opportunities to those with disabilities many park facilities are compliant with ADA standards. Six cabins have been modified to include features like wheelchair ramps. Two boat launches, 14 campgrounds, 10 historic sites and dozens of day use locations provide handicap accessible facilities. Regardless of disability, the system is truly open to all Alaskans.

In 1991, Alaska passed a law which created a special disabled veteran camping permit, providing disabled veterans with free camping in state park campgrounds. SB 13 extends this free benefit to public use cabins, boat ramps, RV facilities and day parking. Please join me and support this meaningful piece of legislation.

SENATOR FRENCH said the bill is easiest to understand if you go to page 3, section 4 that has the meat of the bill, which is this exception in subsection (f) to AS 41.21.026; it says the

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department may not charge or collect a fee under (a) (1), (6) (70 or (8), (11) or (12) of this section from a resident who is a disabled veteran.

Section one adds:

(1) rental of public use cabins or other overnight lodgings;" those aspects of state parks that would free;

(6) allows one to use a sewage holding tank dump station;

(7) admission to or guided tours of visitor centers and historic sites;

(8) use of an improved boat ramp in a park facility developed principally for boat launching;

(11) use of a developed facility that has developed parking and rest rooms;

SENATOR FRENCH said state parks are "nickel and diming you" every time you turn around. If they want to encourage folks to get outside to enjoy the wilderness and what Alaska has to offer, it strikes him that disabled veterans should not have to shoulder this financial burden.

He pointed out that this doesn't just apply to folks who are in wheel chairs and on crutches. You could be disabled through a traumatic brain injury, through post-traumatic stress disorder and lots of other different ways.

SENATOR FRENCH said last year, under the current exemption, 1600 park passes were issued to disabled veterans and he estimated that same number would be using cabins and so forth. They wouldn't get priority use for the cabins, but the basic idea is to encourage more use of the parks by our veterans. He added that there is a definition of "disabled veteran."

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CO-CHAIR WAGONER opened public testimony.

SHARLA "KRIS" COOK, a disabled veteran from Anchorage representing herself said she supports SB 13. She said that Alaska is known as a very veteran-friendly state. Disabled veterans generally earn less than they would have before they were disabled. The certification is already done for the state by the Department of Veterans Affairs; a regional office is in Anchorage and those who are not close to Anchorage can get certification through the Veterans Affairs Central Offices by a phone call and then a letter. The letter both certifies that the

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person is a veteran, that they have a service-connected disability and provides a specific rating for that disability and specifies whether the disability is permanent or temporary. The disability rating is through a federal process, so it relieves the state of having to do that.

MS. COOK said a disabled veteran could bring in his certification letter and present it when getting a parking permit or renting a cabin in lieu of paying money.

CO-CHAIR WAGONER, finding no further public comments, closed public testimony.

CO-CHAIR PASKVAN asked if anyone from DNR was here to explain the fiscal note.

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BEN ELLIS, Director, Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, Department of Natural Resources (DNR), said they encourage the use and enjoyment of all the state's parks by all Alaskans and especially disabled veterans. They support the idea of recognizing the service and sacrifice made by them and emphasize that any concern they may have is largely of a fiscal nature. He explained that any time they grant fee exemptions it's "a double-edged sword" in that revenue is decreased while greater use is encouraged and this bill would be no exception.

He said they currently provide an exemption to disabled veterans from paying fees for overnight camping in state park facilities. The individual must come in to a Fairbanks or Anchorage DNR public information center in person and provide either their red, white and blue disabled veteran I.D. card or the letter Ms. Cook referred to from the Veterans' Administration confirming their status.

MR. ELLIS explained that although the statute provides for an annual pass for disabled veterans, the current practice is to issue a two-year pass. For 2009/10, they issued 1,616 camping passes with a combined value of approximately \$322,200. He said it would be relatively straight-forward to implement a fee exemption to disabled veterans for day use and boat launch fees. There are annual passes available to the general public; for both of these uses a receipt code could be set up so the pass could be provided free of charge to disabled veterans. Without knowing exactly how many would apply, his best guess is that they would potentially lose \$80,000-\$160,000 in revenue from that access.

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MR. ELLIS said the more difficult issue to implement would be the fee exemption for disabled veterans on public use cabin reservations. Ninety-eight percent of those are made via the state online system. If a disabled veteran were required to make their cabin reservations in person, either in Anchorage or Fairbanks, it would be putting them at a disadvantage in comparison to the general public. The most popular cabins are generally reserved exactly seven months in advance. State residents have seven months and if you're out of state you can reserve them six months in advance.

He said there is a way to allow disabled veterans the same access to the public use cabins as the general public. They would need to modify the online system. Contracting out for the design of personal identification number for a disabled veteran to use online and not be charged would cost \$10,000. It is difficult to determine how much the disabled veterans would avail themselves of this program, but he used the fees from their 2010 total to get a low, medium and high estimate. Ten percent of the total would be about \$30,700 that wouldn't be captured; a middle estimate is 20 percent that would amount to a little over \$61,000 and 30 percent of the high end would amount to about \$92,000.

MR. ELLIS said the public use cabins have an over 90 percent occupancy rate. There are some considerations regarding providing exemptions for public use cabin fees. Currently, when someone cancels a reservation, they are issued a credit which they can use for future reservations. That allows someone else to take the use of their cabin. Under this exemption there would be no incentive to cancel and it could, therefore, tie up a cabin when it wasn't being used - resulting again in lost revenue. Due to the remote location of some of the areas, there would be a lack of enforcement and it would be difficult to ensure that the disabled veteran whose exemption was being used was actually present in the group that was staying at the cabin.

He said they have 73 public use cabins that are extremely popular and in 2010 they were used 7,452 nights and generated \$307,335. There are approximately 29 positions that are either fully funded within Parks using general fund program receipts which this money would be. All of those positions are involved directly either with enforcement or management of the parks - the park ranger, the park specialist and the natural resource technicians. If the program receipts would not be replaced by general funds, the revenue reduction would have the potential to

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result in the loss of three or more equivalent positions.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked how the system works now for disabled out-of-state veterans to apply for a cabin permit.

MR. ELLIS replied that non-residents can currently reserve cabins six months in advance; so, they would have to consider a non-resident disabled veteran having a cabin available six months in advance figure out some way to deal with them not coming in in person.

SENATOR STEDMAN asked how many state cabins and campgrounds are in Southeast.

MR. ELLIS replied that he didn't have those numbers but would get them.

SENATOR STEDMAN said one of the concerns is with people securing reservations without paying and that could be dealt with by having a partial exemption instead of exempting the whole thing.

SENATOR FRENCH said Southeast has six state recreation sites and seven cabins. He pointed out that an article in today's newspaper says that the Tri-care insurance program that veterans participate in is asking for a fee increase that would put increased financial pressure on our veterans. And from his calculations, almost 10 percent of the park revenue in the state is currently generated from disabled veterans. It's interesting and speaks to the use of the parks by our veterans, but he thought they could find a different place to put the burden of operating our parks.

CO-CHAIR WAGONER held SB 13 for "the next meeting of opportunity."