

**Testimony Before the Texas House of Representatives
Committee on _____
By Janice Bezanson on Behalf of the Following Organizations**

(Name Them)

Passage of HB 158 in the 84th Legislature brought joy to the millions of people who had long sought adequate funding for Texas' valuable state parks. Dedicating 94% of the Sporting Goods Sales Tax (SGST) to state parks heralded an era of well-staffed parks, functioning facilities, and the opening of new parks. It meant increased tourist revenue for Texas communities and a place where the coming generation could learn about the natural resources on which our economy is based.

The error in language of SB 1366, which undermined the permanence of the SGST funding, can be fixed quite simply. The Texas Legislature has the opportunity to pass HB 78, and restore the funding for state parks that the Legislature intended and the state applauded. A strong argument can be made that the Legislature also has the obligation to pass HB 78, to honor its promise to ensure that its constituents have safe, inviting parks for their families.

The consistency that dedicating most of the Sporting Goods Sales Tax provides is an essential element in bringing Texas' parks back into competition with tourist destinations in other states. Long-needed repairs and capital improvements are multi-year projects, spanning multiple appropriations biennia. The planning and design phases of major projects often take 18 months, actual construction longer than that. To launch these improvements, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department must be able to predict future income.

For the average Texan, delaying these repairs and capital improvements has meant overcrowded campgrounds, closed or partially-closed parks, rest rooms with an out-of-order sign, and interruptions in services that discourage park visitation and reduce park revenues. For the Texas economy, it has meant a reduction in the out-of-state visitors who fuel the state's tourism industries. It has meant less protection for the wildlife resources on which the multi-billion dollar rural real estate economy heavily depends. It has stood in the way of acquiring and opening new parks to meet the recreation needs of a growing populace.

There's no question that Texans *want* quality state parks. State park usage rose by more than half a million people between 2015 and 2016. Poll after poll has indicated a huge level of support for maintaining a first-class state park system. Newspapers and newsletters touted far and wide the 2015 decision to dedicate the SGST. Given Texas' rapid growth and urbanization, providing Texans with outdoor recreation will become an ever more pressing future need.

The good news about passing HB 78 is that the money is there. It won't have to come from general revenue or by initiating new taxes. The Sporting Goods Sales Tax is imposed on precisely the people who use the outdoors – the people who support and use our state parks.

The organizations submitting these comments represent more than ____ Texans. We urge the Appropriations Committee to pass HB 78 out of committee and push for its passage, to provide a first class experience for the nearly nine million people who visit state parks each year. Our deepest thanks for your careful attention to this matter.

For questions, please contact:

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