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General Assembly raids state parks and soils tax



In 1988, Missouri citizens passed a one-tenth of 1 percent sales tax for state parks, soil conservation and the preservation of historic sites. Money from this parks and soils tax was to be appropriated by the Missouri General Assembly for projects to enhance our parks, soils and historic sites.

However, this year the General Assembly is proposing to spend \$230,000 of the parks and soils tax to repair a stained-glass window in the building in which they work — the state Capitol. For this project to qualify to receive parks and soils money, the Capitol must be designated a historic site.

Usually, a historic site is designated by the Department of Natural Resources through the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which evaluates proposed historic sites using specific criteria. Instead of using this established method, the General Assembly is circumventing the process and declaring the state Capitol a historic site by fiat.

"The parks lobby believes that they are the only ones able to designate historic sites. I disagree with that," said Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, who serves as House Budget Appropriations chairman.

"I think it would be wrong to use state parks money for the administrative, or legal, or legislative aspects of the building," continued Kelly. "But for that portion of the building which is museum — public place in character — it is appropriate to use

state parks money."

The designation of historic sites at the whim of the General Assembly, without the use of any objective criteria, is a dangerous precedent. Money from the parks and soils tax might be siphoned off to pay for the upkeep of newly designated "historic sites" in the districts of influential senators and representatives all over the state.

Most historic sites and buildings are no longer in use; for example, a 100-year-old mill in southern Missouri or an abandoned railway station. The Capitol is still being used for its original purpose — to house the state legislature — and should be maintained through general revenue, not from the parks and soils tax. Though the Capitol is a historically significant building, it is not in immediate danger of being destroyed and has not been designated as a site in need of preservation.

"When the Missouri public voiced its support at the polls for the parks and soils tax, they were supporting our state park system and the need for better soil conservation," Joe Barnes of the Izaak Walton League said. "It is not reasonable for the Missouri General Assembly to assume that repairing stained-glass windows is a proper use for these designated funds. Any purported logic used to rationalize this type of budgeting is bizarre and, in my opinion, illegal."

Kelly justified this creative financing by saying that the appropriations committee "saved the \$230,000 in general revenue and used it to put a

new heater in one of the schools for the severely handicapped."

Kelly's rhetoric implies that anyone who does not support the use of parks and soils tax money for Capitol upkeep is a Scrooge who doesn't care if disabled children freeze. This verbal maneuvering does not address the real problem our state government is facing — the need for increased revenue. It also deludes the public into believing that our parks system is well supported.

Since the parks and soils tax was passed, state funding for parks and historic sites has actually decreased. This decrease is partly due to cuts in general revenue but also due to the continued raiding of the parks and soils tax by the General Assembly.

The raid must end.

Don't forget that the 1992 Earth Day festival will be held Sunday in Peace Park on the MU campus. The street fair and activities will run from noon to 6:30 p.m. There will be live entertainment until 10 p.m. The rain date is Sunday, May 2.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.