

Michigan House of Representatives
Natural Resource Appropriations Sub-Committee
Testimony by Phil Porter, Director
Mackinac Island State Park Commission
March 6, 2015

Mackinac is a very special place. It is, without question, one of the great treasures of Michigan, both as a place of world-class historic preservation and as a prominent and successful travel destination. The Mackinac Island State Park Commission, established in 1895, is an autonomous agency located within the Department of Natural Resources. We are very pleased to have an excellent working relationship with Director Keith Creagh and the department's outstanding management team.

The state parks and historic sites under the jurisdiction of the Commission are known as the Mackinac State Historic Parks. They include: Mackinac Island State Park, which encompasses about 80% of Mackinac Island and is Michigan's first state park, established in 1895; Fort Mackinac, built in the 18th-century during the American Revolution, and several other historic buildings are located within the island park. Michilimackinac State Park, in Mackinaw City, includes Colonial Michilimackinac, a reconstructed 18th-century military and fur trade outpost, and the 1892 Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse; and, Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park located a few miles south of Mackinaw City.

These are truly significant parks and historic sites. Mackinac's history is long, rich and important and the island's natural beauty and pre-automotive ambience is wonderfully unique and attracts visitors from all 50 states and more than 50 countries around the world. In 1960 the National Park Service designated Mackinac Island and Colonial Michilimackinac as National Historic Landmarks. This is the highest level of recognition for United States historic sites. Our museum programs were among the first accredited in Michigan by the American Association of Museums (1973) and we have been reaccredited three times since then, most recently in 2008.

The Commission has a long tradition of providing dynamic and creative public programs for visitors to our historic sites. We use a variety of interpretive and education

components that appeal to our diverse audiences including exhibits, audio visual programs and interactive displays complemented by an engaging live interpretation program featuring walking tours, music concerts, dramatic reenactments and craft demonstrations.

We are always in the process of developing new programs and experiences in order to draw and sustain visitors to our sites. A couple of recent examples: In 2008 we made dramatic improvements and additions at Mill Creek when we created Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park. Our new Adventure Tour, featuring a high-ropes-course nature tour, helped increase our attendance by over 30%! In 2010 we opened the Mackinac Art Museum featuring Mackinac-inspired art from Native American pieces to present-day works. This \$850,000 project was fully funded by a gift from the Richard and Jane Manoogian Foundation. At Colonial Michilimackinac we recently reconstructed the 18th-century south-southwest rowhouse. This is the largest reconstructed building on the site and features a dramatic audio visual program about the 1763 attack and capture of the fort. The project was completed in 2013 on the 250th anniversary of that attack. Last year we reconstructed the original fog signal building at Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse. The completed structure now houses the new Straits of Mackinac Shipwreck Museum, another cultural resource that will attract visitors to northern Michigan and support the tourism industry. Like so many of our major projects, this effort was primarily funded through earned income and private donations.

Speaking of anniversaries, we are currently commemorating the bicentennial of the War of 1812 in Michigan. Two significant battles occurred at Mackinac including the very first engagement of the war between U.S. and British troops on American soil. It was during the war, in 1814, that British troops constructed a fort on the top of the island. That outpost, subsequently named Fort Holmes, was reconstructed in the 1930s and has now fallen into disrepair. Over the past two years we raised \$250,000 in private donations through our friends group Mackinac Associates to rebuild the fort. Last year's supplemental appropriation of \$250,000 completed the funding of this project and the construction is underway. This project provides an excellent example of how a private/public partnership can successfully address an important preservation need.

This year we are also commemorating the tricentennial of Colonial Michilimackinac, one of Michigan's oldest and most historic communities. Visitors to the site this summer will enjoy a wide variety of special events and programs to celebrate the 300th anniversary of this site.

Although our sites are closed after October 15, we continue to provide public education programs throughout the winter. We have an award-winning education outreach program that takes Mackinac history and environmental education programs on the road every year and is available in every corner of Michigan. In fact, we are the only state agency, the only Michigan museum, that provides in-classroom education outreach programs to Michigan's elementary school students across the state. The year our education outreach teams are visiting schools in the Detroit, Grand Rapids, Marquette, Cadillac, and various additional districts in southeast Michigan. Teams are also providing programs to schools in the Straits of Mackinac region during January, February, March and April. This is the 27th year in which we have been providing in-class education outreach program for Michigan students. Since this program began, we have visited over 200,000 students in their schools, one classroom at a time.

As a cultural destination, Mackinac State Historic Parks has been repeatedly acknowledged as a crown jewel of Michigan tourism. Money magazine declared Mackinac Island State Park "One of the Twelve Best Parks in the U.S.A." The National Trust for Historic Preservation identified Mackinac Island as one of "America's Dozen Distinctive Destinations." In 2007 National Geographic Traveler Magazine named Mackinac Island one of the top ten sustainable tourism destinations in the world. And in 2008 the Michigan Museums Association honored Mackinac State Historic Parks with a Quest for Excellence, Institutional Achievement Award for creating Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park. In 2012 the island park was named one of the "10 Prettiest Parks in the World" by *Yahoo.com*. In 2013 both Fort Mackinac and Colonial Michilimackinac were selected at "Top Ten Tourist Attractions" in the U.S. (the entire United States!) by *Family Fun Magazine*. Last year, Fort Mackinac received the "Star of the Industry Award" in the Attractions category at the 2014 Pure Michigan Governor's Conference on Tourism from the Michigan Lodging and Tourism Association.

As a result, visitors from across the globe throng to the Mackinac State Historic Parks every summer. In fact, since we opened Fort Mackinac in 1958 we have hosted more than 20 million paying customers at our historic sites. Last summer 348,000 visitors (including 33,000 students) paid admission fees to enter our historic sites and nearly 1,000,000 guests enjoyed our park facilities free of charge. These are huge numbers. Our historic site program is one of the busiest in the United States during the summer months.

On the park side, our 1,000,000 visitors have a profound economic impact on the tourism industry. According to an MEDC/Travel Michigan formula, our visitors generate about \$175,000,000 in area spending. Additionally, about 45% of our audience is from out of state. This means that, because Mackinac is a destination site located in the center of the state, out-of-state travelers are spending money and supporting the Michigan economy by buying gasoline, staying in hotels, eating in restaurants, and shopping at malls all the way across the Michigan peninsulas to and from Mackinac. Clearly Mackinac State Historic Parks is a powerful economic engine supporting Michigan's tourism industry.

The Commission's budget for the current year is a little over \$7,700,000. Of this amount, 28% comes from the State Park Endowment Fund and General Fund, the rest is earned income from admissions at our historic sites, sales in our museums store, park user fees, and grants and donations, primarily from our friends group Mackinac Associates. Because so much of our annual income is self-generated, we operate in a very business-like and entrepreneurial manner, always looking for new opportunities and making sure that we treat our visitors as respected guests. To that end, we developed the Visitor First Initiative which is an agency wide commitment to ensuring that the policies, programs and personality of Mackinac State Historic Parks are customer focused. Essential to this effort is listening to the voice of our customer which we do on a daily basis by soliciting feedback through comment cards, exit interviews and Trip Advisor comments. This information is shared with site supervisors who use it as an important tool for managing the front line staff.

The current FY 2015 General Fund appropriation to the Mackinac Island State Park Commission was lowered by \$50,000 as part of the recent Executive Order. The FY2016 Executive Budget proposes the same, reduced appropriation. While not devastating, this cut will result in a reduction of staff time that will make it difficult to fully care for our parks and historic sites.

The Commission looks forward to continuing to work closely with the legislature, executive office, and DNR leadership to successfully fulfill our mission and serve the citizens of Michigan and visitors from around the world who visit our parks and historic sites.

Thank you.

