

Prairie Dog State Park Master Plan 2021



Introduction

The purpose of this master plan is to guide current and future operations and development at Prairie Dog State Park. Reference to this plan will ensure that operations at Prairie Dog State Park meet the needs identified in the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2020. This plan is required by the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF); accepting such funds dedicates the park in perpetuity to outdoor recreation. Many LWCF funds were utilized in the development of Prairie Dog State Park after its initial completion in the mid 1960's. Grant funding from LWCF, the Recreational Trails Fund, and many others are critical to development of recreational opportunities in all Kansas state parks.

Guidance from this plan also ensures that development will be in alignment with the Department mission statement:

- Conserve and enhance Kansas's natural heritage, its wildlife and its habitats—to ensure future generations the benefits of the state's diverse, living resources;
- Provide the public with the opportunity for the use and appreciation of the natural resources of Kansas, consistent with the conservation of those resources;
- Inform the public of the status of the natural resources of Kansas to promote understanding and gain assistance in achieving this mission.

Park History

Prairie Dog State Park on Keith Sebelius Reservoir, Prairie Dog Creek, Norton County, Kansas, is a Bureau of Reclamation project with a water surface area of 2,200 acres and a shoreline of 32 miles. The state park is approximately 1,000 acres leased from the Department of Interior for a term of 30 years beginning February 16, 1962. The agreement was renewed May 31, 2017 for 25 more years.

Prairie Dog State Park was authorized by the Kansas legislature in 1962 and was opened to the public in late 1964. The park is managed by the Parks Division of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. An area of approximately 1,000 acres is currently managed as the State Park. Only 65 acres are open to public hunting while the remainder of the park is a non-hunting area mainly for the safety of park patrons, facilities, and for the non-consumptive outdoorsmen.

The United States Bureau of Reclamation began work on the Norton Dam, which impounds the Keith Sebelius Reservoir, in 1961 and was completed on December 1, 1964. The dam is located on the Prairie Dog Creek. This multipurpose dam is a rolled earth filled structure, with a height of 101 feet above the streambed and a crest length of 5,000 feet. Reservoir storage is 26,133 acre-feet when it is at conservation pool.

The structure benefits include flood control, irrigation, and sediment storage, municipal water for the City of Norton, and wildlife and recreation benefits. The water level in Keith Sebelius reservoir has increased over five years but decreases due to the outflow of the Almena Irrigation District.

Located four miles west and one mile south of Norton, Kansas, with six campgrounds, four cabins and two boat ramps, the park serves a variety of constituents. The nearest town is Norton, the county seat of Norton County. Situated 11 miles from the Nebraska border, the town population is slightly less than 3,000. Farming and farm-related occupations are the primary sources of income in the county.

Visitation estimates for Prairie Dog State Park are derived from a traffic counter taken with a pneumatic hose stretched across the only entrance road into the park. The traffic counter documents each axle, and a formula is used to calculate the approximate number of people for a recreation area. Visitation increased in 2020 due to COVID-19 effects as well as a high water level in the reservoir. Otherwise, visitation closely mirrors water levels.

There is an obvious correlation between revenue and visitation. High seasonal camping at Prairie Dog State Park helps keep visitation and revenue up in years when the water level is low. These seasonal campers enjoy camping regardless of the water level.

Facilities: More detail, sites, cabins, concessions, lagoons, offices, shops, utilities (providers), roadways, waterfronts.

Miles of Road: Approximately 7 miles paved and 3 unpaved

Miles of Trail: 1.4 miles with the first 1000 feet concrete

Cabins: Two primitive cabins (West of Prairie Dog Campground and two modern cabins (North of Prairie Dog Campground)

Campgrounds:

Prairie Dog

40 water/electric sites

12 electric sites

5 primitive

Shady Rest

21 water/electric sites

5 primitive

Cedar Ridge

10 water/electric/sewer

5 primitive

Branded Cedar

6 water/electric sites

10 primitive sites

Mushroom Shelters

10 total, only 1 with electricity

Cottonwood

10 primitive sites

Meadowlark

5 primitive sites

Leota Cove

10 primitive sites

Boat Ramps: Two launch locations with a total of three lanes

Covered boat slips: 1 boat slip with a total of 20 slots

Like all Kansas state parks, Prairie Dog State Park manages many of the responsibilities of a community. Trash removal for the park is currently done by a local contractor. The park has 14 dumpsters throughout the 1100 acres. Trash is picked up once a week during the regular summer months, twice a week during holidays, with only minimal pickup during the winter months. If contract pricing increases, the park may have to manage its own trash disposal. This would require purchase of equipment and more staff time. The cost/benefit ratio must be analyzed periodically.

The park uses natural gas from Midwest Energy at the area office only. This is primarily to heat the office and the maintenance shop. Propane is only used at the Prairie Dog Campground bathhouse to fuel two water heaters. This tank is filled about every other year, making this a cost-effective solution.

Prairie Dog State Park owns and maintains its own water treatment facility. Because of this, the park pays nothing for the water, just electricity for the mechanics of the pump house. The campgrounds are supplied by two wells located in the state park. Water is pumped up into a 22,000-gallon water storage tank until a demand is needed. The pump house is located adjacent to the storage tank. It was renovated in February of 2017 and has two pressure tanks that keep the water pressure between 45-55 PSI in the park. Once the pressure drops to 45, water pumps pull water from the storage tank, through an inline chlorinator, and out to the facilities. At least one staff member is a certified water supply system operator through the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and checks the pump house and chlorine levels daily. This water system is not able to withstand freezing temperatures. Under normal circumstances, the park does not activate the water system until danger of freezing is past and drains it in the fall before freezing is expected.

Prairie Land Cooperative is the electric provider for this area. The electrical cost for running the entire state park and all its amenities is one of the largest budget items. The statewide cabin account is used to pay for a portion of the electric bill with the remainder paid out of the park budget. Though the electricity costs are significant, the cost is more than offset at present by the utility charges to campers. Continuous monitoring of this situation is required to support price changes within the entire state park system, as not all parks have the benefit of relatively low utility costs.

Cabins are presently another beneficial cash flow opportunity for the park. Most of the peak cabin reservations are in the summer with a few busy months for deer seasons in November and December. Prairie Dog's four cabins are located around the main Prairie Dog Campground. Two are deluxe cabins with indoor bathrooms and two are sleeper cabins. From the rental fees, 12% is deposited in an account for the park to use to maintain the cabins. Normal maintenance costs include cleaning supplies, wood stain and appliance repair. Some years may require further investment in refurbishment or major repair. Part of the cabin revenue also goes into a statewide cabin maintenance account. Costs to run the four cabins (trash pickup, cleaning and electricity) are minimal. Part of the cabin revenue is held in a statewide cabin fund and utilized by the parks to pay part of the utility bills during the part of the fiscal year when cash balances are lowest.

1892 Adobe Home

Tourists will relive a bit of the past when they visit the Adobe House located at the Prairie Dog State Park. This earthen-walled structure is the one of the few in Kansas on its original location and preserved as a museum. As far as can be determined, the house was constructed in 1892 by the John Spencer family.

The Adobe House was constructed out of a mixture of mud and straw, called adobe, which can be viewed on the interior walls. A horse was used to travel in a circular trench to which dirt, water, and straw were added and mixed to the proper consistency. The mixture was then formed into bricks, put in place, and given a smooth coat of the same mixture.

After the construction of the Lake Sebelius Dam, the adjoining land became the Prairie Dog State Park. This area was to include picnic shelters, bathhouses, and the old adobe house was to be torn down. Interested citizens protested and wanted it preserved. A volunteer group worked on the building. They fixed the roof, the deteriorating walls, replaced missing windows, cleaned the interior, and furnished it with antique furniture donated by interested persons. Recently, the Adobe Home has been extensively renovated.

During the construction of the dam, an old wagon was discovered buried under 19 feet of earth in the old original Burlington Railroad fill. It became visible when the shoreline of the reservoir was worked. The wagon, which is an old two-horse, dirt-moving slip, was recovered and donated to be placed near the house. A replica windmill with a wooden wheel was also moved in.

1886 Hillmon School House

The Hillmon Schoolhouse was the sixth school district to be organized in Norton County. The school houses were numbered as they were built and the Hillmon School was District 6 in Crystal Township. A family by the name of Hillmon was active in getting the school established. Mr. and Mrs. Dick Hillmon came to Norton County in 1874, and took land two miles west of the small town of Devizes.

The original structure was a combination of log and dugout, and was located in the northwest part of Norton County overlooking the Sappa Valley, 1 1/2 miles south of the Kansas-Nebraska State Line. The school had two windows with a door at the back of the building. The desks were made of slabs of wood with pegs for support.

In 1886, the current building was erected just one-half mile south of the original structure on land donated by David Fawcett. The schoolhouse was a community center and used for church services, funerals, weddings, and many school activities. In 1967, the one-room school was accepted by the Norton City Council from the Hillmon-Devizes Community. The building was moved to its present location at the Prairie Dog State Park, and in September, 1969, the schoolhouse was officially dedicated as a tourist attraction.

Staffing

Staffing is lean with only a park manager, park ranger and administrative assistant as permanent employees. Managers and rangers wear many hats within a park. Fully statewide law

enforcement certified, they are primary law enforcement for the park and backup for other law enforcement within the county. They rely on other county officers for their backup. They are also responsible for mowing and repairs within the park, as well as completing or supervising completion of construction projects within the park. The administrative assistant is in effect the office manager for the park, managing reservations, fee collection, bill paying and contract management.

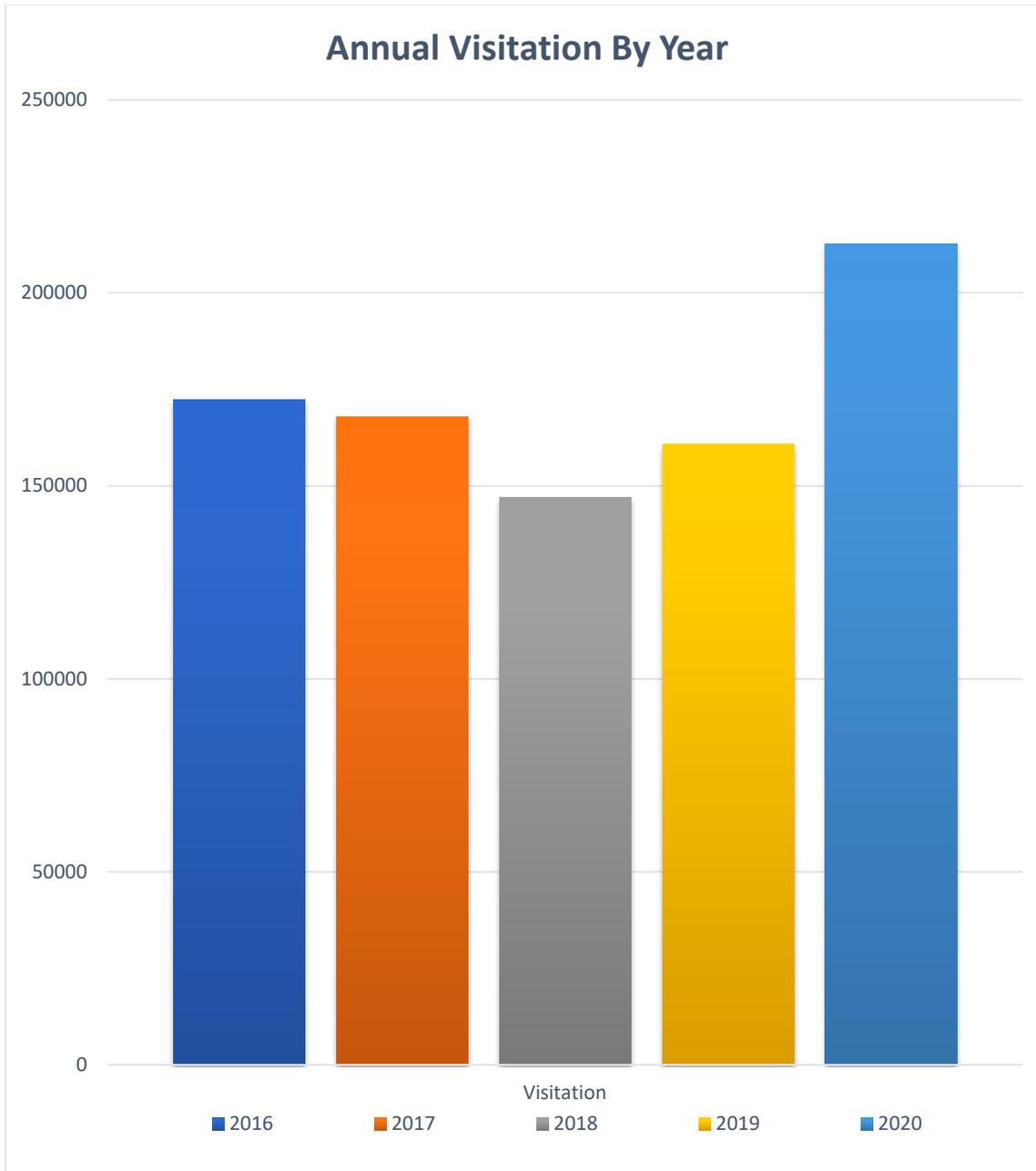
When possible, the staff is augmented with four seasonals for maintenance, up to three administrative positions and two seasonal rangers. Camp hosts take care of marking sites, cleaning campgrounds, and helping over-nighters find a site after office hours in our six campgrounds. A cabin host takes care of check-ins, check-outs, and cleaning the cabins. These hosts sign an agreement for duties performed in exchange for their campsite fees. Staffing needs are continually evaluated as to the need for more seasonal or permanent staffing as park operations change in scope.

The park regularly recruits AmeriCorps members. AmeriCorps is a service-learning program that pays a living stipend during service and an education award upon satisfactory completion of the service term, which can range from 300 to 1700 hours. Members provide educational programming and work on special projects. As the park is only four miles from Norton, it has been relatively easy to recruit members living close by. This program helps members gain experience for future careers, as well as helping the park get projects completed. The park benefits substantially from this program every year and the number of projects they accomplish is astounding. Members worked together on projects, as well as putting on special events and educational programs in the park. Projects included but were not limited to the following: Increasing fishing access, clearing trees at the shoreline for a better view of the lake, trail erosion repair, invasive cedar tree removal, setting up a Geo Cache program, parking lot expansion at the nature trail, Adobe Home repair, installing the Lifejacket Loaner Kiosk, shoreline driftwood cleanup, building and planting a tree nursery, installing split rail fence around the archery range, noxious weed removal, creating a new primitive camping area and helping put on special events such as: First Day Hike, youth pheasant hunt, youth duck hunts, youth deer hunts, one room school house tours, and Adobe Home tours.

Operations

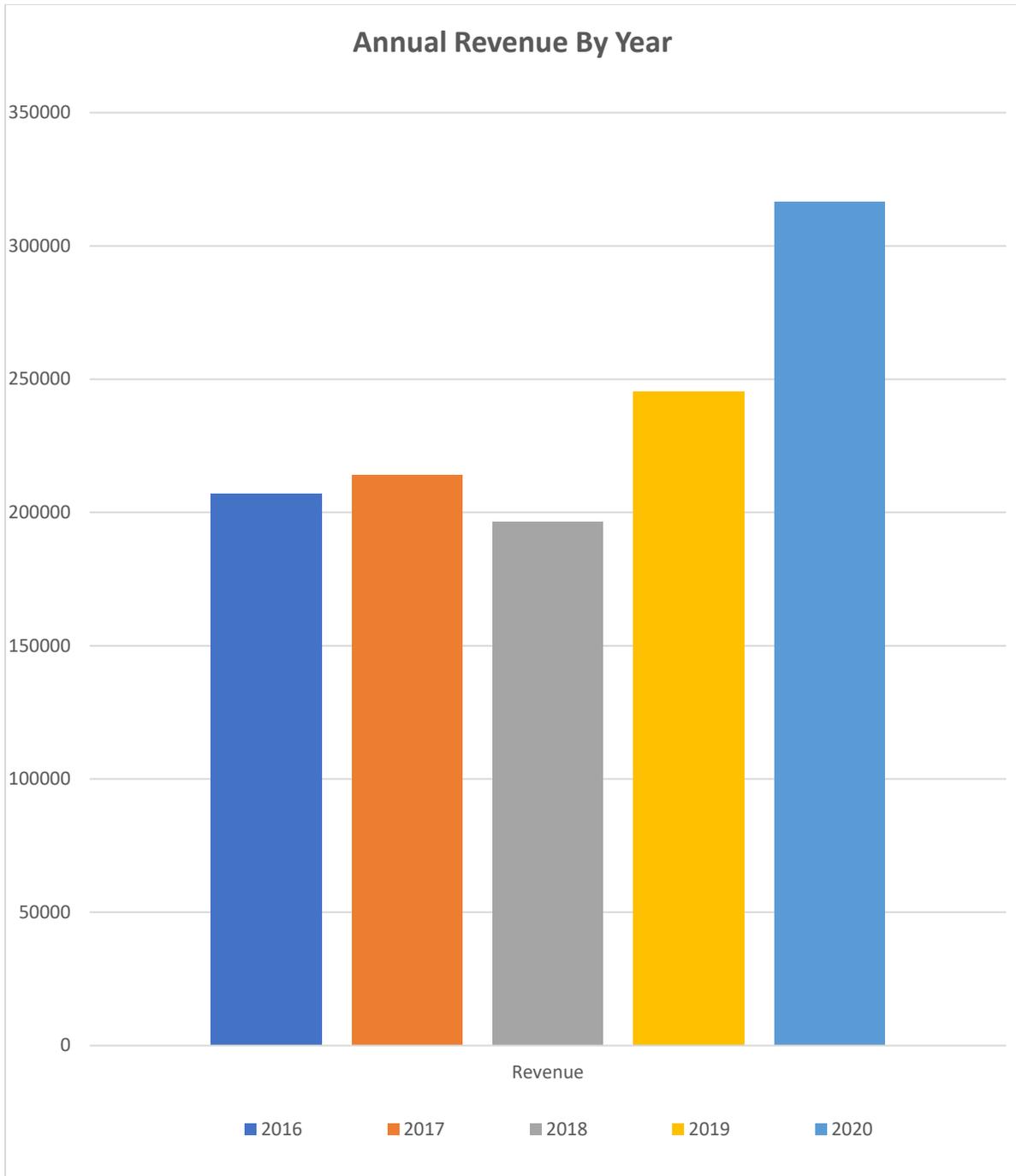
Visitation

Annual visitation estimates for PDSP are derived from traffic counts taken with a pneumatic hose stretched across the only entrance road into the park. The traffic counter documents each axle and a formula is used to calculate the approximate number of people for a recreation area. This year, visitation was 212,792. This is almost 52,000 higher than the previous year. Visitation increased this year due to COVID-19 effects as well as a high water level in the reservoir



Revenue

Annual Revenue for 2020 was \$316,780. This is a \$71,345 increase from 2019. This is due partly to the COVID-19 impact on people wanting to get outdoors more as well as a consistent water level. Revenue for 2019 was \$245,435. This was an increase of \$48,919 from 2018. The two biggest changes from 2018 were the eight foot increase in water level and the new fees for seasonal camping.



Budget

The largest part of the Prairie Dog State Park budget goes to paying for electricity, which was \$40,158. Solid waste charges at Prairie Dog State Park remain fairly steady. Staff support includes clothing and personal protective equipment, as well as training and lodging for training. Office supplies to keep the office running smoothly can fluctuate depending on changing procedures but remain fairly constant.

Access to the statewide cabin fund to meet utility expenses and payment of the professional training and law enforcement courses by other funds outside of the Prairie Dog State Park budget assists greatly in keeping the budget in the black. The Friends Group also helps pay for park repairs and adding to the amenities.

Friends Group

A Friends Group was established in December 2001 to operate the covered boat dock at the Prairie Dog State Park and currently consists of about 20 members. The Plan of Operations permits the group to collect all proceeds from the rental of the 20 boat slips and fishing access permits. The Friends then utilize the funds to provide insurance for the dock, purchase or provide maintenance needs, and fund other park projects. During 2020, the funding was utilized to acquire beach sand as well as a few tractor attachments and fund several special events. Other amenities provided by the Friends Group over the years have been cabin furniture and decorations, a side by side utility vehicle, flowers and trees, paint, office aquarium, Ok Kids day prizes, tractor implement attachments, paddle boats, and many others. The agreement with the Friends Group was renewed for five years in 2011 and was most recently renewed again in 2017.

Agricultural

The purpose of agricultural operations at Prairie Dog State Park is to provide noxious weed control and premium wildlife habitat, which will maximize the wildlife observation opportunities on the area. There are approximately 200 acres of cropland in the park. On average, this contract brings in about \$2,200 per year. The contract is for an initial two-year agreement with two possible five-year extensions. This fund is then utilized to purchase equipment and other needs for the park.

Special Events

In 2020, we were limited in the number of special events at the park due to COVID-19 concerns and a number of scheduled events had to be cancelled. However, before the outbreak, the park was able to host the First Day Hike as well as the annual youth pheasant hunt. The new Lake View shelter is often reserved for weddings, reunions and picnics. Fishing tournaments are very popular throughout the year, especially between April and October. At the new archery range, competition and 3D shoots are hosted by the Norton Archery Club. Campground events, such as cookoffs and small concerts are arranged by campers. Normally, the park hosts an annual first grade field trip with Norton elementary school, as well as OK Kids Day. These events are fun for all of the youth and the staff as we enjoy working with children in the park, hopefully encouraging them to become avid park users throughout their lives. Later in the winter months, staff hosts youth deer hunts and waterfowl hunts.

Equipment

The second biggest expense for the park is normally vehicle and equipment acquisition, repair and fuel. Mowers are a big part of the state park's maintenance expenses. The heavy use and age of some of the mowers can cause this expense to vary. Sufficient staff that has experience with the particular equipment is often able to affect repairs in a more cost-effective way than having to take equipment to a shop for maintenance or repair. Having a shop and the tools and equipment to handle the maintenance is also a benefit. Patron satisfaction often hinges

on mowed grass and clean, functional restrooms. Experienced staff goes a long way to support this.

Heavy Equipment status

YEAR	MODEL	MILEAGE	CONDITION
2020	Ford 4WD ½ ton crew cab	9,059	Excellent
2003	Ford 2WD ½ ton, ext. cab	138,055	Fair
2007	Ford 4WD ½ ton, ext. cab	170,196	Poor
1999	Ford Windstar Van	124,648	Fair
1994	Chevy 2WD ¾ ton, Reg. cab	105,168	Poor
1989	Chevy 1 ton, Dump Bed	58,190	Poor
YEAR	MODEL	HOURS	CONDITION
2008	JD 5425 Loader, 55HP, Cab	1,848	Good
1990	JD 2355, 55HP	4,096	Poor
1984	JD 570A, Grader 85HP, Cab	5,486	Fair
1983	JD 401B, 70 HP	4,244	Poor
YEAR	MODEL	HOURS	CONDITION
2006	Super Z 72 Rear Dis.	1421	Fair
2008	Super Z 72 Rear Dis.	1391	Fair
2013	Super Z HD 72 Rear Dis	908	Good
2018	Super Z 72 Rear Dis.	538	Good

Future Plans

The State Park would like to add and improve on areas with high demand as well as offer new amenities to increase the recreation opportunities within the state park.

Campgrounds

Throughout the summer, campsites are in high demand and are usually booked full on every weekend. There is more revenue to be made by adding campsites to provide for the high demand instead of turning them away with no other option. This project would add an additional 20 sites near the boat ramps to offer overnights and traveling fisherman an area to camp in. This area is already flat, and has water, electricity, and sewer in the area. Adding these 20 sites would cost just under \$100,000 depending on the options to add concrete pads or its own dedicated sewer tank.

Cottonwood Campground is a primitive campground in the middle of the state park with four concrete mushroom shelters. We would like to develop this area by adding an additional four shelters.

Cabins

The state park has room to add up to four cabins near the main cabin area. These could be modern or primitive cabins. A dedicated water well and power supply already exist for the current cabins and could be shared with the new ones. These cabins could range from \$40,000 - \$60,000 each.

Playgrounds

We would like to offer more playgrounds at all campgrounds in the state park, to allow all campers to have close access to an area where children can play. Branded Cedar, Cedar Ridge, and a new campground by the boat ramps could each use a new medium sized playground. These medium playgrounds would cost around \$20,000 each.

Viewing Center

Prairie Dog State Park is home to a unique creature that no other park in Kansas has—Prairie Dogs. This colony of prairie dogs lives on a 15-acre corner on the north edge of the park and hosts about 500 individuals. As of now, there is a mushroom shelter with picnic tables for people to stop and view these creatures in their native habitat. This mushroom shelter does not have side walls and rattlesnakes often find their way into the shelter. Also, prairie dogs do not come out near the shelter when people are present. So, without binoculars or a good zoom camera, patrons have a tough time seeing the small animals. A specialized viewing center would be perfect here. The building needs to be enclosed to keep out snakes with informative signs and posters on the wall, as well as a few zooming lenses so people can actually see these creatures from a far. Estimates for this type of an educational viewing shelter range from \$50,000 to \$200,000.

Walking Trail

The existing nature trail is 1.4 miles long with the first 1,000 feet paved concrete. We would like to increase this trail distance by adding another two miles. Estimates for the trail include two walking bridges, bushes and trees, gravel, benches, info boxes, outdoor exercise equipment, parking lot, and possibly a vault toilet.

Kids Pond

The park has an abandoned farm pond area that was used in the early 1900's before the park was established. This five-acre area has a preexisting dam on the south edge and will only need minimal dirt work. A dedicated well could be drilled, or the existing wells could be used by trenching a pipe approximately 500 yards to the nearest junction. A parking lot and pond infrastructure would still be needed.

Splash Pad

The main Prairie Dog Campground has a high enough usage that a splash pad could be utilized efficiently. The area has flat ground, power, and a water source. The campground has 60 campsites surrounding the main area with a basketball court, volleyball court, horseshoe pits, main bathhouse, four cabins, and a large event shelter. In the summer months, the area is crowded with younger kids always on the move looking for something to do. This would provide a great attraction for the area as well as a great amenity for the state park. The state park manager is already certified to operate and maintain clean water for the facility. Cost estimates for a smaller size simple splash pad range from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

Maintenance

The area in the park most frequently needing maintenance is the beach. Staff works each month in the summer fixing the erosion and layout of the beach to keep it safe. The area is not a natural sand beach so the expense of adding sand each year is about \$2,000. The beach has a parking lot that will fit about six cars, but frequently has over a dozen on the average summer day. This area needs some heavy equipment dirt work and a more permanent solution to the erosion and parking issues.

The archery range is not currently handicapped accessible. This feature has 10 new targets and is a great amenity for all ages. The parking lot is approximately 15 feet higher than the shooting pad, so an archer needs to walk down a hill before reaching the shooting pad. This project will take heavy equipment dirt work as well as a concrete sidewalk poured for level access.

The 1.4 mile nature trail in the park is a highly visited and well used area. This trail was designed to be dirt when it was first created but has washed out over time. This trail needs to be permanently repaired with crushed rock to keep the washouts from getting deeper. Some dirt work will need to be done to restore the trail to proper grade and then gravel packed in firmly. This may not be an extensive project but would take additional funding for gravel as well as specialized equipment. Approximately 400 yards would be needed to cover a mile.

Prairie Dog State Park Map

