



State parks need a new sheriff to tee off on waste

By Jim Waters

Put Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio in charge of Kentucky State Parks.

The innovative lawman is reportedly saving Maricopa County taxpayers millions of dollars a year through innovative programs that earn him the media's designation as "America's Toughest Sheriff."

Sheriff Joe became known for making inmates live in tent cities, work on chain gangs to cut costs on public projects, wear pink boxer shorts and eat bologna sandwiches. He gets the most out of every tax dollar spent at his operation.

Sheriff Joe has his detractors. Just like those of us who want Frankfort to cut wasteful spending feel the heat from big spenders and the government-knows-best crowd, so the good sheriff takes flak from bleeding hearts for actually enforcing the law.

Nevertheless, voters keep reelecting Arpaio. He's up for a fifth term this year. His approval rating is around 80 percent.

Frankfort's political leadership could learn a thing or two from Sheriff Joe. He shows that it's possible to do the right thing under fire, save a multitude of tax dollars and get reelected.

If one lone lawman with a few innovative ideas and a "git-r-done" attitude can massively reduce spending on local projects, then why can't an entire state government effectively address deficits in a single program like the Kentucky State Parks, which lose \$29 million a year?

A new report by state Auditor Crit Luallen concludes that state parks' financial wounds have grown worse – from oozing cuts to an all-out hemorrhaging.

A lot of this money is being lost on golf courses. In fact, Governing Magazine once dubbed government-run golf courses "the most non-essential of non-essential public services."

The Auditor's Office report backs it up. It revealed the state spent \$55-million on "golf-related projects" alone from 1994 to 2007, yet "golf activity experienced its greatest loss of approximately \$700,000 in 2007."

The more the public pays, the more public golf courses lose. That's also true of the entire system. Since 1995, lawmakers have appropriated \$316 million to renovate and expand state parks. Yet the bleeding continues. Attendance is down. Fewer golf rounds are being played.

Lawmakers in other places have applied their own financial tourniquets to stop the losses at public golf courses.

In Los Angeles, for example, revenues from five of the six public golf links turned over to the private sector increased between 24 percent and 400 percent during the first year after privatization. The city of Detroit receives annual income of more than \$250,000 by contracting with a private company that manages the city's public-turned-private golf courses. The company, which, unlike government, must be profitable, also invested more than \$2.3 million in course improvements.

But Kentucky lawmakers don't seem too interested in best practices that yield large savings in other states. Our politicians and bureaucrats often ignore ideas that don't originate with them – even if their approach isn't working. Such thinking could earn them some time on Sheriff Joe's chain gang.

After all, why should Kentucky taxpayers continue bailing out unprofitable golf courses? Why doesn't the state sell them, or at least lease them, so they compete in the private sector? Why should private courses have to compete with government-backed courses that have the luxury of taxpayer subsidies to offset losses?

Commerce Secretary Marcheta Sparrow could only muster a mumble in response to Luallen's report, calling it "constructive."

But she offered no "constructive" plans to address the parks' deficit next year. Where is her plan to get Kentucky out of the golfing business or follow up on Luallen's common-sense recommendations, including closing some facilities during slow times?

No doubt, that notion intimidates Sparrow and her political pals in the legislature, who know that such good ideas would have the collateral effect of shrinking the size of the bloated merit-system workforce.

Maybe Luallen should invite Sparrow to the auditor's office for lunch to talk about it. She could serve her a bologna sandwich.

Correction: Last week's column incorrectly reported the amount of a planned cigarette tax increase in New York City. On June 3, cigarette taxes in New York City will increase to \$4.25 per pack.

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