
Associated Press

Mass. May Sell Naming Rights for its Parks to Corporations

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BOSTON - With the state facing a \$3 billion deficit, Massachusetts lawmakers are considering selling corporate sponsors the naming rights to parks and forests, including the Walden Woods immortalized by Henry David Thoreau.

Some big-city mayors around the country have considered similar proposals, but Massachusetts would be the first state to pass such a law.

The move is a reflection of the desperate financial straits in which many states and local governments find themselves.

"It seems to me, should there be parks, information kiosks and all kinds of potential opportunities, let's just talk about them," said Republican Bradley Jones Jr., the House minority leader who drafted the measure. "If we weren't in a major budget crisis, people wouldn't necessarily focus their efforts there."

But the prospect of a leafy stroll in a forest emblazoned with the name of a Fortune 500 company has alarmed environmental groups.

"What's next, big plastic Coke bottles on top of the Statehouse?" said Jim Gomes, president of the Environmental League of Massachusetts.

House lawmakers on Monday voted to draw up guidelines for sponsoring and re-naming parks and forests. The measure, part of the proposed budget, goes next to the Senate. Once the guidelines are developed, lawmakers would have to vote again on whether to authorize such sales.

Lawmakers said they have no estimate of how much money the idea might raise and are uncertain what restrictions would be placed on sponsorship deals. Those details would be worked out in a report due by November.

Steve Adams, president of the Boston-based Pioneer Institute, a conservative think tank, said selling corporate naming rights is a no-brainer.

"I don't know how you could be against this, frankly," he said. "No one is talking about putting up giant signs that mar the landscape. If companies are willing to do it, why not tap that opportunity?"

The National Park Service has several hundred partnerships with businesses. Target and the Discovery Channel made donations toward the recent restoration of the Washington Monument. Interpretive signs for visitors included small company logos.

"They understand that this is not their opportunity to advertise," National Park Service spokesman Gerry Gaumer said. "A partner does have to get something. They can pitch later that 'We helped restore the Washington Monument.' "

But renaming a National Park site for corporate interests is out of the question, he said.

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington has also allowed companies to attach their names to specific exhibits and attractions.

An exhibit of cars, trains and motorcycles, due to open in November, will be housed in the General Motors Hall of Transportation, which will carry the automaker's name for the next 30 years under a \$10 million deal with GM.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History titled a traveling exhibit in 2001 the Smithsonian O. Orkin Insect Safari after Orkin Pest Control gave \$1.2 million.

In Asheville, N.C., the Buncombe County Parks and Recreation agency is offering naming rights to tennis courts, swimming pools and trails but has no takers yet.