Originally established as a national lakeshore in 1966, the newly-designated Indiana Dunes National Park was created in February 2019, giving Indiana its first national park. Stretching 15 miles along the southern shore of Lake Michigan, the park preserves archaeological sites, and historic structures—including five Century of Progress Homes from the 1934 Chicago World’s Fair—prairies, wetlands, forests, rivers, and dunes. As original owners of the Century of Progress houses moved on and other historic buildings sat vacant, the park worked with partners to find solutions. Historic leases now exist for private residences, preschools, and youth camps, with more opportunities forthcoming. Approximately 2.2 million visitors explore the park each year and spend more than $92 million in local communities.
The Field Station Cooperative Preschool was searching for a new home when it learned that the park was looking to save historic buildings from a former Swedish settlement. One site fit the needs of the school, and so the park, the Field Station, and Indiana Landmarks formed a partnership to protect and readapt the site. In the early 2000s, the Field Station signed a 55-year lease, acquired nonprofit status, raised funds, and organized volunteers to rehabilitate the property. Through this effort, a dilapidated barn and an old farmhouse were saved, and an original log cabin was discovered. Structures that were in dire condition are now restored and being used as an educational center for 80 students who have access to a rich ecosystem to complement their learning. This win-win relationship has increased community engagement with and access to the park, provided significant resources for a nature-based school, and rehabilitated historic structures that may have been torn down otherwise.
A PROBLEM

The National Park Service (NPS) maintains a network of 417 parks and sites that protect some of our nation’s most spectacular historic, cultural, and natural resources. However, after 100 years of operation and inconsistent public funding, the NPS faces a deferred maintenance backlog estimated at $11.6 billion—of which approximately 47% is attributed to historic assets. Deferred maintenance in our national parks puts historic and cultural sites at risk of permanent damage or loss, and in the absence of funding, the condition of these assets will continue to deteriorate and become more expensive to repair and preserve in the future.

A SOLUTION

Leasing of historic buildings in the National Park System is an effective and proven public-private partnership that can be used as part of the suite of options necessary to abate the NPS deferred maintenance backlog. The NPS has the legal authority to enter into lease agreements whereby the park maintains ownership of the building, but the lessee is responsible for the preservation and maintenance needs of the structure. For long-term commercial leases of 55 years or more, the lessee is able to utilize the federal historic tax credit and receive a 20 percent credit for qualified rehabilitation expenses. Historic leasing partnerships alleviate the burden on the NPS to maintain historic buildings by reducing maintenance costs and the repair backlog for the park, allow reallocation of scarce resources to other priority projects, create opportunities for private investors, provide services for visitors and residents of gateway communities, and bring iconic historic buildings back to life. The National Trust for Historic Preservation plays a leading role in advocating for the use of leasing by the National Park Service by providing research and guidance about best practices and highlighting opportunities to leverage this innovative preservation tool.

The House Appropriations Committee has also noted, in part, that “leasing of historic park buildings has proven to be an effective public-private partnership that has brought private investment to the repair and maintenance of historic park resources.”


The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a privately funded nonprofit organization, works to save America’s historic places. Visit us at SavingPlaces.org.

For more information, contact:
Pam Bowman
Director, Public Lands Policy
pbowman@savingplaces.org
(202) 588-6347