

## Meet a Friend

# Group invents new ways to draw people to William O'Brien Park

## Friends of William O'Brien State Park

Nancy Hokenson moved into a house close to William O'Brien State Park in 1983 and quickly fell in love with the place.

"It's a very nice park," she said. "There are ski trails, a lot of hiking trails. I like the birds and animals. It's just nice to be outside. It's quiet. I enjoy being there."

As president of the Friends of William O'Brien State Park, she is at the park a lot. It's a gallant crew of about 30 families carrying on the work started in 2001 after an earlier advisory board disbanded and the friends group was started from scratch, she said.

The friends group has been hard at it ever since, coming up with innovative ways to help the park and encourage Minnesotans to visit the 1,650-acre park 12 miles north of Stillwater on the St. Croix River.

A March workshop that teaches children and adults to build blue bird houses to take home, an ice cream social in the summertime and selling coffee and hot chocolate at the Marine-O'Brien Ski Race in January are some of the activities the group participates in or sponsors at the park.

"If the park needs help, we'll go out and help," she said.

One of the most popular ideas the group developed is Falloween. In middle to late October, people are invited to come to the park. The park's naturalist organizes activities for families. Campers decorate one of the campsites for Halloween and children trick-or-treat from camper to tent.

"The one event that has been growing is the Falloween, said Steve Anderson, William O'Brien State Park manager. "It has filled our campground. People decorate, they get prizes and it is filled for



Several members work the table at the friends group's July Ice Cream Social. From left to right are Treasurer Kris Lindberg, President Nancy Hokenson and Secretary Mary Burke. Photo by Tom Hokenson.



Vice President Sheldon Fox, member Sue Mahler and Burke hand out treats during January's Marine-O'Brien Ski Race. Photo by Joe Hanson.

next year. The friends have been behind that. That is one of their successes."

Hokenson said most of the members of the Friends of William O'Brien come from Forest Lake, Stillwater and Marine on St. Croix, although some come from the Twin Cities. She would like to have more members.

"We've gotten to know a lot of people at the park," Hokenson said. "The staff, and there are a lot of volunteers who have been there a long time, too."

Anderson is happy to have the support of a strong friends organization.

"It opens doors to new opportunities for the public who might not ordinarily come to the park," he said of events like Falloween. "If our goal is to attract new visitors and get them into outdoor activities, then that is a success. Friends groups certainly provide a mechanism for us to do things we might not be able to do otherwise."

For more information, check the website at [www.williamobrienpark.com](http://www.williamobrienpark.com).

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tion priorities contained in Parks & Trails Council's Strategic Plan. It should provide a firm basis for continuing our long-standing relationship with DNR's Division of Parks and Trails but also build new relationships with regional park agencies.

Finally, the plan recognizes in approving the Legacy Amendment, the voters expected more money would be invested to create, in the words of the plan, "world-class parks and trails," not just continuing to maintain the current system. To drive home this point, the plan echoes one of the Legacy Amendment's guiding principles when it states: "Supplement, not replace. Enhance current parks and trails revenue streams, don't replace them."

That is one of our guiding principles, and is detailed in our current legislative agenda.

The completion of the Legacy Plan is important, but it is just the first step. The Parks & Trails Council's challenge is to help turn the plan's vision into reality. I think we're up to the task.



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