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Panel OKs \$5 Illinois State Museum admission fee; July 2 remains target reopening date

The Illinois State Museum in Springfield is on track to reopen in early July after a legislative panel Tuesday approved a proposal to allow it to charge an admission fee.

The bipartisan Joint Committee on Administrative Rules voted to allow the Department of Natural Resources to go ahead with the admission fee that Gov. Bruce Rauner's administration said is necessary for the museum to reopen. The panel did not discuss the issue before voting on it.

DNR said it will charge a \$5-per-person entrance fee to the museum, which previously was open free to the public. Children under age 18, seniors and veterans would still get in for free.

DNR previously said that if JCAR allowed it to begin charging the admission fee, the museum would reopen July 2.

"July 2 is still the target date for the relaunch," DNR spokesman Tim Schweizer said after the vote.

The museum was closed to the public at the end of September to save the state money, even though the staff was kept on the job. Since then, 30 employees — or about half of the staff — has left voluntarily. Interim director Michael Wiant has said the facility can reopen with its existing staff.

In February, Rauner said the museum could reopen if ways were found to make it less reliant on state funding. That included charging an admission fee for the first time, but also making greater use of private contributions and underwriting. So far, the admission fee is the only component that's being implemented.

At the time, Rauner said the state spent about \$6 million a year on the museum, which drew about 200,000 visitors annually.

State officials hope that getting the museum reopened by July 2 will allow it to be open enough hours this year to keep its accreditation. The Accreditation Commission of the American Alliance of Museums put the facility on probation last year after it was closed.

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The home of the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, the Alan J. Dixon Building. (Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)