

New Mexico State Parks Advisory Board Meeting

Meeting Minutes

Monday, December 19, 2022

10:00 AM

Via WebEx Events

1. Call to Order

Parks Advisory Board Chairwoman Selena Connealy and Director Toby Velásquez called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

2. Roll Call – PAB Members Present

Virtual Roll Call was taken by Director Velásquez and quorum was present.

Attendee Name
Selena Connealy, Chairwoman
Judith Polich, Vice Chairwoman
Stephanie Bestelmeyer, Member
Patrick Killen, Member
Eileen Everett, Member
Toby Velásquez, State Parks, Director
Colleen Baker, State Parks, Bureau Chief Design & Development
Manuel Overby, State Parks, Bureau Chief Law Enforcement & Boating Safety
Dr. Robert Stokes, State Parks, Bureau Chief Program Support
Jared Langenegger, State Parks, Bureau Chief Field Operations
Lois Caroline Pedro, Executive Assistant to Cabinet Secretary (via WebEx)

3. Approval of Agenda

Motion to approve the agenda was made by Member Patrick Killen and Seconded by Member Eileen Everett, passed unanimously with no objections.

4. Approval of Minutes

Motion to edit minutes, page 6, under 8, 7.B “... *should say member Eileen Everett, not member Eileen Polich. Stephanie Bestelmeyer name spelled incorrectly on last minutes*”.

Judith Polich made motion to approve minutes as corrected and seconded by Stephanie Bestelmeyer, motion passed unanimously with no objections.

Chairwoman Connealy thanked Toby Velásquez for his leadership.

5. Director's Report

a. Personnel Hiring Status & Introductions

Director Velásquez noted that some Bureau Chiefs were present along with new staff.

Colleen Baker, Design and Development Bureau Chief: Discussed major projects (35) currently working on master plans for nine (9) of the parks, one of which is Eagle Nest, which is the first one for approval of the updated Park Master and Management Plans.

Navajo Lake, Oliver Lee Memorial, Living Desert Zoo & Gardens, Coyote Creek and Eagle Nest Lake.

Colleen: Water conservation fund projects currently executing – Coyote Creek, Eagle Nest Lake, Bottomless Lakes, Navajo Lake. Working on second phases at Coyote Creek, Eagle Nest Lake and Bottomless Lakes and Oliver Lee Memorial. Developing new projects for Oliver Lee Memorial as well Bureau of Reclamation projects. Projects also at Sumner Lake, Brantley Lake Elephant Butte Lake and Living Desert Zoo & Gardens. Other projects include: El Vado/Heron Lake, Navajo Lake as well as federal highway administrative projects, Elephant Butte being the largest one with the Lakeshore Drive project. Commencing projects on El Vado/Heron Lake Road and Sumner Lake highway.

Colleen: Appropriations: We are working on projects at Oliver Lee and Living Desert Zoo and Gardens State Parks.

There are ongoing water and wastewater projects for the ARPA funding. We have approximately \$6 million; on target to complete what we need each year to execute funding - Bottomless Lakes waterline replacement and Sugarite Canyon and Ute Lake Morphy Lake – road improvement; Fenton Lake park-wide improvements.

Boating projects – Bluewater Lake – dock and ramp extension, Conchas Lake – Boat ramp replacement.

One position currently hiring - Construction Project Manager who we anticipate will help with facilitate instruction/communication between design/park staff and contractors.

Joseph Flemming will be joining bureau and State Parks in December as Park Planner.

Comments:

Judith Polich: Is there a way for Advisory Board members to have access to management plans to comment? Colleen concurred.

Eileen Everett: Are there updates from the devastating wildfires, their impact on state parks/remediation mitigation needed?

Toby Velásquez: The Field Operations Chief can provide the most up to date information about Morphy Lake working with federal counterparts as well our NM State Forestry office.

Jared Langenegger: Morphy Lake had significant damage. Lost storage structures and new fencing, tables, signage. Working on a contract with an arborist to evaluate the trees which were burned and identify hazard trees and any salvageable. The impacted part of Morphy Lake is roped and signed. No access to that area for the public in this area.

Comments:

Judith Polich: Was there much ash/debris flowing into the lake and what is the integrity of the lake at this point/fish population?

Jared Langenegger: The lake fared pretty well, the Acequia Associations made a diversion prior to the heavy rains, so a lot of ash was diverted and did not enter the lake. There was a small issue with the water quality where NM Game and Fish could not restock as the pH was too high. The lake was recently opened, water quality is better, stocking in spring.

Toby Velásquez: Some parks were closed directly due to extreme fire conditions; Morphy Lake (August) and Pecos Canyon (September) were back open and operating.

Toby Velasquez/Jared Langenegger: We requested \$160,000 from FEMA in reimbursement/reclamation for repairs/replacement of infrastructure. Working with Risk Management.

Comments:

Selena Connealy: Kudos to your department.

Colleen Baker: We couldn't do it without everyone – it is a team effort.

Jared Langenegger: Major priority of the Field Operations Bureau is filling positions working closely with HR. Updating policies with Committee reviewing fees and housing policies. Looking to replace our fleet. Working closely w/design and development on all capital projects including wastewater and sewer and septic et al.

Comments:

Selena Connealy: Would you like input on policies/fees?

Director Velásquez: Policy doesn't really deal w/fee structures, it has more to do w/how the internal processes of chain of custody are managed in order to manage for cash from intake in the field all the way through reconciliation with the State Treasury's Office. I think we have policies that could be within the scope of the Board and would share those opportunities with you.

Judith Polich: (To Jared) How many vacancies presently? I believe we had 76 when we last met.

Director Velásquez: I will take that. We now have a great HR and our vacancy rate is about 23%. We are in process of hiring and the rate should reduce to 13%. We are seeing retirements and resignations, some due to office policies.

Director Velásquez: Thank you Jared. Now to Chief Overby.

Manny Overby: I started at NMSP in 1998 at City of Rocks State Park. This is my 25th year in Law Enforcement. In 2008 Director Velásquez initiated position requests for Law Enforcement officers in our NM State Parks. We have requested more positions for 2023. We are reclassifying our Park Rangers as Law Enforcement officers/w/salary increase. This will allow us to be more competitive in the market. We can't compete with \$30,000 signing bonuses that Dona Ana County is offering. Working on initiating new contact with NM Department of Public Safety (DPS). We now have a centralized dispatch. Now operate through one organization in three (3) different Regional Dispatch Centers – 1 North, 1 Central and 1 South. Working to acquire body cameras for all officers. Acquired new duty firearms, new handguns for officers. Currently working with an outside organization to rewrite Section 26 which is our Law Enforcement Policy. Currently in process of purchasing vehicles. Working on new on-board computer systems for law enforcement – in vehicles to be connected to dispatch. This will enable law enforcement officers to stop using their cell phones.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Thank you for your discussion about law enforcement efforts/finding qualified members to work/ is there anything that the Board can do to assist you.

Manny Overby: Perhaps w/revision of policies in the future.

Director Velásquez: Reclassification of officers/we need to convince Legislators to support our operating budget moving forward. We can start to use new position ranges to incentivize salaries and be more competitive within that range. We have the foundation for that with the reclassification but will now phase into requesting an improved operating budget through the Executive and Legislative Finance Committee (LFC).

Director Velásquez: I'd like to introduce Dr. Robert Stokes.

Dr. Robert Stokes: I'm the Program Support Bureau Chief – has cultural, environmental, safety and training, business enterprise, LWCF, and Friend's Groups/Education sections; busy compiling projects that are waiting on clearances or other needs from Program Support, mostly from Colleen or Jared. Several open positions need to be filled, including archaeologist and Friend's/education coordinator; LWCF MOA to Las Cruces for Apodaca

Park delivered for signatures; working on setting up CPR/First Aid training session for early 2023 at Parks request; looking at restarting education programs in Parks up and running/more events than presently.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Dr. Stokes we are glad to have you with us; please look to us as a resource and let us know how we can help you.

No other questions for Dr. Stokes.

Director Velásquez: Introduction of Administrative Services Bureau Chief Miche Garcia.

Miche Garcia: Overview of work; looking at updating organizational chart/filling vacancies/liaison who works w/other bureau chiefs/working w/financial aspect of budget.

Comments:

Selena Connealy: Inquired about Miche's previous work w/EMNRD (HR)

Director Velásquez: Thanked Lois Caroline Pedro/Cabinet Secretary's Office for attending to minutes.

Director Velásquez: NM State Parks has enormous amounts of work completed. We are owned outright by the State of New Mexico. Two-thirds of State Parks are managed on behalf of another entity organization i.e., water users' associations to the Federal Government. We have the right personnel in the positions to get the work done.

Comments:

Selena Connealy: Now that you have adequate support in terms of your deputies, would you please share some of your plans?

Toby Velásquez: Now that we have our Executive Management and Senior Management tier filled, we are reorganizing and seeking dual Deputies. There is a lot of administrative work and we need the support. We look at 41 decentralized locations across the State, supporting 321 employees that's with 190 full time equivalent positions. We need to return to that model, which is an effective model for us. One of my commitments to this Division is to achieve increased resiliency from administration changes – i.e., environmental to economic.

NM State parks is vulnerable to the change every 4 to 8 years. NM State Parks needs to be stabilized so that no matter the change there will be consistency and continuity in management so that our field/administration operations et al., are not compromised by those changes and one of those is to take the next step and recreate a more resilient organizational structure. The upcoming Legislative Session is 60 days.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Thank you. I think I probably speak for the rest that we definitely see that. It's a much healthier organization to have those leadership positions distributed.

Selena Connealy: No further questions for Director Velásquez. We're on to the Legislation Session (60 days) coming up.

b. Legislative Session

Director Velásquez: Staff may leave at this point should they need to.

Director Velásquez: We have a 60-day Session, a second term. A lot of revenue being generated into our state. Having outreach, people indicate they want to add properties to existing/create new properties/create new state parks/find other ways to grow outdoor recreation/natural cultural resource environments in our state. I'm anticipating there be bills that we will work with on work on with that. Prefiling starts in January. Our team will reach out to you as bills come along for your review/feedback.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Director Velásquez, could you speak at all to the Governor's Budget and what that looks like for NM State Parks?

Director Velásquez: I can't, but I can convey that our budget request was \$9 million more than our FY23 budget and that's across the board for operating. We've gone through the interim committee with more discussions/negotiations ahead.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Thank you. Other questions? No questions. Now on to Master Management Planning.

c. Park Master & Management Planning

Director Velásquez: One of the requirements of the Division is that NM State Parks has a 5-year Management Plan for every Park, and that they're up-to-date. Colleen and her team have started the master/management plan process. We will share with the Parks Advisory Board. I am proud of the due diligence Colleen and her team have done with these Master and Management plans.

Comment:

Colleen Baker: We've had really good engagement from the parks and from our partnering agencies. I'm interested in doing the Master planning as well as it starts to put the plans into actions, it's a good approach to start saying "How does this actually look on the ground?" and increasing/diversifying visitors or providing better education/how does that look like physically/how do we start to prepare space to provide those programs/amenities to visitors? Project plans, that then we can go to various funding sources/we need to know how to best implement funding/what we are trying to do at each park to protect the resources there/the climate is changing/visitors' preferences are changing/the way people recreate and get outdoors.

Director Velásquez: We will get that to the Board and will need a Public Hearing and Tribal Consultation.

Comment:

Stephanie Bestelmeyer: Thank you. I'm looking forward to seeing the Eagle Nest plan. How much is common template versus how much is individually tailored?

Colleen Baker: There is a policy for our Park Management Plans. They do have an outline, we follow that. Each park's unique aspects/resources/communities are addressed.

Director Velásquez: If you look at the Rio Grande Nature Center and it's plan and the same plan for Clayton Lake, there are some parallels in the approach in the template with background history, geology, natural and cultural resource information, but it's all very specific to that park and it makes them much more unique and clearly conveyed in those plans of how different these parks are in their relative Counties – 25 state parks in 33 Counties across the state.

Comment:

Stephanie Bestelmeyer: Thank you.

Selena Connealy: Any other questions for Colleen?

Note: No further questions.

d. Land & Water Conservations Program

Director Velásquez: The program is new to the Division in the way it's being used currently and had national support – congressional. Congressional support from across the country ensured that there was more funding coming into and being distributed to states than ever before. Because of that New Mexico is a beneficiary. What used to be \$200-300K in funds that was primarily used to support state parks capital improvement with a 50% match has now expanded to approximately to \$3 million dollars, and with that we have a sub-grant recipient application process. The last 2 years we've been successful

in getting the application process out. Last year we had approximately 11 entities, organizations, communities apply for other funding.

Colleen Baker: This Federal program has 50/50 match through our Federal coordinating agency, which is the National Park service in order to be able to understand how to implement this within our state; inform our state on what the requirements are to be able to have shovel ready projects, ready for application as well as the process of going through the Federal application scenario and then waiting for the feedback not necessarily from just the division, but from our Federal partners. We had a 3-day meeting in person in Santa Fe which Robert Blankenship/Collen Baker coordinated. All the partners came in-person to meet and discuss about their challenges and some of their interests.

Colleen Baker: I'm working on ways to get that information out and to find partners to supplier local applicants in developing projects that can be approved, so they may get the grant funding/ongoing work to make sure that they are actually ready to award and then working with partners to develop better project proposals, applications and get all that work done prior to application.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Have you had an instance where somebody applied and weren't quite ready and you provided some technical support for their application?

Colleen Baker: So, two things, we haven't had the program up and running yet/don't have an example yet of providing the technical assistance and Robert Blankenship is actually the coordinator. We did speak w/some of our partners like Outdoor Recreation Division and the Recreation Trails Program, which is now managed by the Department of Transportation (NMDOT).

COMMENT:

Judith Polich: Are these funds available to private entities as well public entities?

Colleen: No, the Land, Water and Conservation Fund Program requires the property to be kept in perpetuity, it requires local/quasi-governmental organization to apply for the funds.

Director Velásquez: Madam Chair, Land Water and Conservation Funds will likely continue to be a standing Agenda Item due to impact w/communities – it's important the Board stay apprised of funding in communities and the work being done by the Divisions by being a good partner.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Thank you. It's definitely an issue in smaller communities, which don't know how to do this kind of work. Need to help them access that across the board, not just larger communities.

Colleen: We are working to streamline/facilitate the process, so we understand what level of clearance each project needs; some will take less time than others. With our help they will know what kind of commitment they're looking at and then work w/our partners/non-profits et al., to develop projects.

Comment:

Director Velásquez: Any other comments/questions?

No other remarks.

Director Velásquez: We will move on to Agenda Item 'e' now.

e. Reservation System

Comment:

Director Velásquez: I want to provide a quick review on the Reservation Systems: in the past, Director Tafoya had informed you that we had moved campsite inventory during the pandemic, it was one of the strategies that we have used and maintained in order to make certain that we were able to open back up and modernize fee collections. Modernization carried through to most state parks and resulted in approximately \$2.3 million dollars in cash management being removed from the field process, through and to the reservation system. When you think about what our revenue is as a division on average, with the pandemic mixed in we averaged \$4.6 million dollars in camping, a majority of that revenue was moved from a highly intensive staff hands-on process to a more efficient process. My point is that modernization occurred even under these tough times. The public can now utilize the reservation system as their way of planning for their recreational visits, we are proud of that. For the most part visitors are happy, although there are others that don't like to plan in advance and let us know their points of view on the matter. Resultant of the reservation system update, parks staff are now less encumbered and more able to work directly, hands-on with visitors to the parks, highlighting sites, history and interacting with them.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: Director Velásquez, are there any parks which only use the Reservation System and have no cash?

Director Velásquez: We have two (2) parks that have transitioned to 100% Reservation System; however, they have day use which is not available by reservation. There is still a mix. Some Parks have majority of their inventory and other parks still have available first come, first served campsites.

Director Velásquez: I should have better numbers during the next meeting.

Comment:

Selena Connealy: I assume that other States use this system? (Referring to Reserve America)

Toby Velásquez: That's correct. There's a modernization across State Parks systems in the US that's a priority. The fees for modernization are on the back end.

Toby Velásquez: For example, a point-of-sale debit, or credit card sale at a state park used to cost one dollar, now it is over three dollars. There are costs associated with modernization, that we have to manage for and ensure that we build those costs in so that they are not taken from our revenue.

Comment:

Eileen Everett: Director Velásquez, thank you for that – it's a heavy lift for the staff (referring to Staff – approximately 50% reduction in cash handling). Will there be parks having credit/debit card in the future.

Toby Velásquez: We are looking to address this, there was a study previously done, which was shelved during the pandemic. Many of our Park's fees have not changed since 1998. I will need the support of the Advisory Board in addressing fees and reviewing what fees are. We must not price New Mexican's out of our recreation and we truly value our non-resident traffic. We need to have parity with other states, i.e., Colorado, Arizona et al.,

Comment:

Judith Polich: State Park fees are undervalued compared to what other States charge.

Toby Velásquez: Yes, Member Polich, that is one of the option strategies that we have within the feasibility study. We would like the Board's feedback.

Selena Connealy: Director Velásquez, we will look forward to seeing/reviewing that and support you with the implementation. Are there any other questions?

Toby Velásquez: Madam Chair, that's my Agenda for today.

Selena Connealy: Thank you for your incredible amount of work for our state parks. It's amazing to see where we are now, compared to the last time we met. Thank you to you and your team.

Judith Polich: Absolutely.

Selena Connealy: We will now take a break for 9 minutes until 11:35 a.m. when meeting was reconvened.

6. President's Report and Committee Reports

a. Parks Advisory Board Membership Comment:

Selena Connealy: We are now in the second half of the meeting. We have 3 matters on our Agenda. The first item is Board Membership, I have some updates and would like a conversation about that. I'd like Committee Reports and would then like to set dates on the calendar for 2023. I had a conversation with Melissa Salazar (Governor's Office) about Board Appointees for the Parks Advisory Board. The best way to move people through the process is to send Melissa Salazar their contact information and she will reach out directly to them, answer their questions and ensure their paperwork is filled out correctly.

Selena Connealy: Pat Walsh is interested. We are allowed up to 11 (Eleven) members. I'd like to have a discussion on how to recruit people. I'd also like to discuss operationally what we should do as a board. I'm not certain that we necessarily have to vote as a board to send a candidate through the process. Patrick, can you give us insight from your previous experience?

Patrick Killen: Everything is at the pleasure of the Governor, the Governor's office. Continue the conversations with Melissa Salazar. The formal process is providing the names to the Governor's Office, through the website.

Judith Polich: Are we required to have a minimum of seven members?

Selena Connealy: It states that. Director Velásquez, I believe we have had this conversation previously.

Toby Velásquez: I don't believe there is a violation, due to transition of members and administrations. I would like us to have a minimum soon.

Eileen Everett: Ideas? We have areas which do not have representation, such as law enforcement, as well rural areas. We could make some recommendations if we have more input.

Toby Velásquez: social media, press releases, word-of-mouth. Chief Overby could perhaps reach out to law enforcement network.

Judith Polich: Is there a backlog of applicants.

Toby Velásquez: Not for this board.

Selena Connealy: I have developed some recruiting language and will send it to you Director Velásquez.

Toby Velásquez: Thank you. I will work with our Marketing Manager, Wendy Mason. Deputy Leahy is our Tribal Liaison who could reach out to the Pueblos, Tribes and Nations.

Selena Connealy: We would like to recruit interested parties from across the state, especially from rural communities. Any other thoughts?

Stephanie Bestelmeyer: I'm in favor of us meeting in state parks and inviting people to the meetings. It may be difficult for people to attend outside the Rio Grande Corridor.

Selena Connealy: Thank you Stephanie. That is important and thoughtful. Director Velásquez, I have a proposal for where we might meet. Would our state parks be able to support a virtual/hybrid meeting?

Toby Velásquez: We could look at that, pick a park which is more centrally located.

Selena Connealy: We can return to this during our closing discussion. Let's turn to Committee Reports.

b. Committee Reports

i. Climate Change:

Judith Polich: I am happy to meet with you Director Velásquez or Secretary Cottrell Propst to discuss Climate Change in the parks and get more insight on how we can work together and be helpful.

Selena Connealy: It does seem like the master plan process will provide an opportunity to support climate change in mitigation/resilience planning.

ii. Outdoor Classrooms

Selena Connealy: Stephanie/Eileen

Eileen Everett: The Public Education Department (PED) is working on launching an outdoor learning program. Vanessa Barela was selected for the role. She was previously on the Interagency Task Force and supported outdoor classrooms for years working closely with Dr. David Certain administering the Children in Parks Program. Vanessa welcomes you to reach out to her.

Selena Connealy: Stephanie?

Stephanie Bestelmeyer: I'm interested in the Master Plans of the State Parks, to determine what works and each park and how we might support that.

Selena Connealy: Director Velásquez, is there an Education position in State Parks?

Director Velásquez: I'm looking to re-establish one, in fact we are looking to establish a full-time outdoor education coordinator for our division. Previously we had a half time position which was very successful. Miche (Garcia) and I are working on addressing this matter.

Selena Connealy: That is great news and we are certainly in support of that. Let us know if there's anything we can do. Once the position is posted we can make sure it gets out to our networks.

Eileen Everette: I will also help in any way.

iii. Law Enforcement

Selena Connealy: We have a Law Enforcement Committee, but no members. Are there any announcements/comments?

Toby Velásquez: Madam Chair, in addition to what Chief Overby presented earlier, we are continuing to improve the program and adding a 3rd party policy review and revision process which is close to being in place, so that we can update Section 26, Law Enforcement Policy. Dispatch is updated. We are working on body cameras. Updating our firearms platform all of which need support though policy and procedure. I'd like to have members on the board who have that area/skill set background who could help facilitate matters.

iv. Public/Private Partnerships

Selena Connealy: Our last Committee is Public/Private Partnerships, Patrick Killen and myself.

Patrick Killen: We have a blueprint to look at as NM corporations/community foundations came together during the pandemic. We have new contacts and organizations to reach out to.

Judith Polich: Would you be willing to work with me on some climate change initiatives for the Parks? Concurrence from Patrick Killen.

Patrick Killen: There seem to be a lot of donors now who are focused on climate change, resiliency.

Selena Connealy: Thank you. Before we move into closing discussion, are there any updates or announcements?

No comments were provided.

7. Closing Discussion

a. New Business

No new business.

b. Next Meeting Date:

Comment:

Selena Connealy: We are suggesting that PAB Advisory Board 2023 meeting dates should be held in: late March (Virtual), June and September and final one in December.

Selena Connealy: Discussed where to hold PAB Advisory Board meetings.

Judith Polich: It's important to have virtual access available for people who can't make the meetings in person.

Patrick Killeen: We need to maintain accessibility, i.e., hybrid option, find a park which has good bandwidth.

Director Velasquez: I would like all to meet in a park, specifically experience it, then meet the staff in those parks. The greatest value we have in our division is our staff. Meeting the staff in their workplaces, visiting with them would be a great morale booster.

Selena Connealy: Proposed meetings looking forward:

March 29, 2023, 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

June 20 – 23, 2023 (TBD) to be scheduled

September 26, 2023 – 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. Mesilla Valley State Park w/Virtual Option

December 6, 2023 – 10:00 a.m. (Virtual)

8. Public Comment

Comment:

Director Velásquez: I was not contacted by anyone or provided information or any comments from the public to put into the record.

No members of the Public attended the meeting.

9. Adjournment:

Chairwoman Selena Connealy: There being no further business, we have reached adjournment on agenda.

Member Eileen Everett moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Member Patrick Killen.

Selena Connealy: All in favor, none opposed. We are officially adjourned at 2: 41 p.m.

Approved:

Selena Connealy

4/29/25