

State of New Mexico  
Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department

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**Michelle Lujan Grisham**  
Governor

**Erin Taylor**  
Acting Cabinet Secretary

**Ben Shelton**  
Deputy Cabinet Secretary

**Toby Velasquez**, Director  
State Parks Division



**New Mexico State Parks Advisory Board Meeting**  
**Wednesday, March 25, 2026, at 10:30 A.M.**  
**Wendell Chino Building, State Parks Conference Room 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor**  
**1220 South St. Francis Drive, Santa Fe, NM 87505 and via Microsoft Teams**

- 1) Call to Order –  
Chair Connealy called the meeting to order at 11 a.m. due to technical difficulties related to board member participation via the virtual platform and telephone option. The Board had general discussion related to the agenda from 10:30 a.m. and no action was taken by the Board during that time.
- 2) State Parks Advisory Board (Board) Roll Call –  
Director Velasquez took roll call, and a quorum was confirmed as follows:
  - Chair Selena Connealy: Present
  - Vice Chair Patricia Walsh - Present
  - Member Patrick Killen - Present
  - Member Eileen Everett: Present
  - Member Stephanine Bestelmeyer: Excused Absent
  - Member Rodney Paris: Excused Absent
  - Member CJ Wiegel: Excused Absent
  - Member Judith Polich: Present Virtually
  - Member Thomas Garcia: Present
  - Member Sharon Evanich: Excused Absent
- 3) Approval of Agenda –  
Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the draft agenda. Member Garcia made a motion to approve; Vice Chair Walsh seconded the motion. The motion carried.
- 4) Approval of Minutes –  
Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the draft meeting minutes. Member Everett made a motion to approve the minutes with revisions to correct the spelling of Member Paris' name and change "Upper Learning" to "Outdoor Learning". Member Killen seconded the motion as amended. The motion carried.
- 5) Election of Officers -
  - a) Nominations, Discussion, and Action: Member Everett made a motion to nominate

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current Chair Connealy and current Vice Chair Walsh; Member Garcia seconded the motion. The motion carried.

6) Open Meetings Act Resolution -

- a) Discussion and Action: Member Garcia made a motion to approve the draft Open Meetings Act resolution with the amendment of updating the virtual platform reference from Webex to MS Teams. Member Killen seconded the motion. The motion carried.

7) Public Comment -

- a) Dustin Berg joined the meeting, and Director Velasquez stated that Mr. Berg is a division consultation partner. Mr. Berg stated that he represents GoUnlimited, an organization that supports people with compromised mobility to have access to outdoor recreation.

8) Director's Report -

a) Legislative Session 2026 Update:

Director Velasquez gave an update on the 30-day legislative session, he stated that it was a fast session focused on fiscal year 27 (FY27) operating budget, general fund, and capital budget. Director Velasquez stated that the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) FY27 operating budget recommendation was flat due to last year's increase in state parks fees. Director Velasquez went on to state that the House Appropriations and Finance Committee (HAFC) supported the LFC recommendation. However, when the Senate Finance Committee (SFC) received the budget recommendation, there was a \$2 million dollar increase in general fund support. He mentioned that this is the single largest general fund increase from one fiscal year to the next in the last twenty years. Director Velasquez stated that Representative Rebecca Dow strongly advocated for the division during the HAFC committee meeting, and he emphasized that division self-generated revenues are entirely vulnerable to the economy and environmental conditions. Director Velasquez explained that the division received \$20 million in capital funds, which is less than the \$40 million requested.

Director Velasquez stated that it was disappointing that the \$8 million in the State Supplemental Land & Water Conservation Funds (LWCF) was not reauthorized. Member Everett asked what happened to those funds. Director Velasquez stated that it was swept and redistributed, he went on to state that the Division LWCF coordinator is now pivoting approximately \$6 million in LWCF applications requests to be potentially funded by the Department of Finance and Administrations Match Fund.

Director Velasquez stated that the division supported House Memorial 3, which requests state agencies to participate in an insect workshop. Vice Chair Walsh asked if she could have more information so she could possibly join that workshop and pass on the information. Director Velasquez confirmed that the workshop information would be provided.

Vice Chair Walsh asked if the LWCF match funds are authorized by the state legislature, Director Velasquez confirmed that they were allocated by the state legislature in 2025 for one year. Member Everett asked if there were any concerns expressed by any legislative member about why these funds were not reauthorized. Director Velasquez stated he was not aware of any expressed concerns. Chair Connealy asked what the Board can do to help with the next session, and Director Velasquez stated that we will have to evaluate the transition period to the new administration. Director Velasquez stated that the Board can always advocate legislative and administration support for increased operating, general and capital funding.

Chair Connealy asked about Lifetime Veteran Passes as well, how they too will affect revenue. Deputy Director Richman stated so far 8,748 passes have been issued and the average issuance is 1,000 per month. It was discussed that this negatively impacts division self-generated revenues.

Director Velasquez said that for FY27, the division will continue to seek out lease or acquisition options for Pecos Canyon and Sugarite Canyon State Parks. Vice Chair Walsh asked if that acquisition in Raton involved Bartlett Mesa and Director Velasquez confirmed that. Vice Chair Walsh also asked who is the family that owns Buck Ridge Ranch, another property up for acquisition by the City of Raton, and Director Velasquez confirmed that this property is currently owned by the Nature Conservancy.

b) Fiscal Year 26/27 Budget Update:

Director Velasquez explained that the division is closing out FY26 and it has been a tight budget. The division continues to meet with our department administrative services team to close out the fiscal year. Director Velasquez stated that the division will evaluate and compare FY 25 and 26 park fee revenues at the end of the fiscal year.

c) Capital Improvement Projects Update:

Deputy Director Baker gave an update on all capital projects; she gave some highlights of all the projects going on across the system. Deputy Director Baker stated that improvements are ongoing at all state parks except Cerrillos Hills State Park. Deputy Director Baker discussed the ongoing system wide outdoor restroom project, boating infrastructure projects and assessments, and highlighted the upcoming cabin and campground improvements ribbon cutting event at Coyote Creek State Park.

Vice Chair Walsh asked about the status of the cabin campground project at Sugarite Canyon State Park. Deputy Director Baker stated they are still working on roads out there and that a project completion timeline is still unclear. Director Velasquez stated he is hoping that the cabins would be available for the fall season.

Chair Connealy complimented the division on just how great a job they all are doing. She also asked how the staff are and if there has been any burnout. On behalf of Member Evanich, Chair Connealy asked about the status of the septic project at Villanueva State Park.

Deputy Director Baker stated she would have to confirm with the staff at Villanueva State Park because there have been changes made to the project plan. Deputy Director Baker also gave an update on the climate change signage right now and mentioned that they are delayed.

Deputy Director Baker also mentioned that the division has done some in-house reorganization with the promotion of two staff members, Emily Stout is the Lead Architect, and she will now be supervising all design staff. In addition, Joey Flemming is the Division Land Program supervisor and will be supervising two project planners. Deputy Director Baker stated that the division committed to expanding the Design & Development Bureau by four positions and they hired Devin Delnicki who is our new Division Construction Project Manager. Director Velasquez mentioned that a Division Biologist would be hired soon.

Director Velasquez asked Administrative Bureau Chief Miche Garcia and Deputy Director Angie Richman to talk about their new hires as well. Bureau Chief Garcia stated she just hired a Capital Project Budget Analyst and Budget and Contracts Specialist, for her team to be complete she still needs to hire a LE Budget Analyst.

Deputy Director Richman introduced Kari Richards, Division Field Operation Bureau Chief. Bureau Chief Richards was promoted from her position as Division Southeast Region Manager.

Deputy Director Richman discussed the upcoming recruitment and hiring of a Division Statewide Education Coordinator. Deputy Director Baker also mentioned the new hire of Division Safety and Compliance Officer Garrett Humble.

d) Personnel Vacancy Update:

Administrative Bureau Chief Miche Garica stated that the division has significantly reduced its vacancy rate to 19%, the lowest rate in the last four years. Bureau Chief

Garcia mentioned the division is now in the process of hiring seasonal workers and has completed over 25 seasonal hire packets. Director Deputy Richman added that the seasonal program costs approximately \$1 million dollars a year.

Member Garcia asked if seasonal employees get benefits like retirement and Bureau Chief Garcia confirmed that they do not because they are on a 180-day plan. Member Everett stated how amazing it is to have the rate down as fast as it has come down in the last year and noted that it is a significant reduction. Vice Chair Walsh asked how Sugarite Canyon State Park is doing by finding a manager there, and Deputy Director Richman confirmed that recruitment was completed and interviews would be conducted soon.

e) Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan Update:

Division LWCF Coordinator Nav Khalsa presented on the status of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). The primary purpose of SCORP is to maintain state eligibility for federal LWCF funding, and it's a five-year plan. The 2021-2026 existing plan is about to expire. Ms. Khalsa is now working on the next 5-year plan. Planning activities include press releases, surveys, plan review, outreach, and engagement activities.

Vice Chair Walsh asked since the \$8 million for LWCF was not reauthorized what does that mean and what happens. Ms. Khalsa explained that she is helping all applicants apply for DFA Match Funds. Chair Connealy asked what the time frame is to apply, and Ms. Khalsa stated the application period is open from September to January each year and can take longer than a year to receive funding from the time they apply. Director Velasquez mentioned that this is something the Board could advocate for. Chair Connealy stated there will be pressure to get those funds available. Ms. Khalsa also pointed out that Main Street Grants are also great for matching LWCF. Member Everett mentioned she took the survey and it was an approachable and intriguing survey. Vice Chair Walsh asked Ms. Khalsa how the outreach is going. Ms. Khalsa stated they are going well and that she will participate with focus groups.

Chair Connealy commended everyone on their planning and work in support of the SCORP.

Deputy Director Richman was proud to mention that Peter Lipscomb, Park Manager at Cerillos Hills State Park initiated a Governor's Proclamation for Dark Sky Week in state parks. The Governor extended statewide, and we now have a proclamation for New Mexico Dark Sky week starting April 13 - 20, 2026.

Note: Chair Connealy called for a short break at 12:13 p.m. The meeting was called back to order at 12:27 p.m.

9) President's Report and Committee Reports:

a) Discuss the option to establish a community engagement committee:

Member Evanich had shared in the last meeting that she was interested in establishing a community outreach board committee. Vice Chair Walsh detailed how she reached out to communities during her employment with the division. Chair Connealy stated that since Member Evanich was not present, this could be carried over to a future Board meeting.

Division staff discussed that the agency is very engaged in community involvement through the Kids in Parks program which brought in over 500 students to state parks last year. Director Velasquez stated that the division is committed to bringing more kids to parks and he has increased the funds for that program from \$15,000 per year to just under \$40,000.

Director The division also has community involvement through the State Park Friend's Groups which at times are over 20 total. Deputy Director Richman feels strongly that our park staff are very engaged in community outreach.

Vice Chair Walsh just wanted to mention that there was some pushback from the Friend's Group at Sugarite Canyon that they are being asked to fill out the volunteer paperwork that they didn't not have to fill out in the past. Deputy Director Richman mentioned that the Friend's Group at Sugarite Canyon at this moment needs to renew their agreement since the term has expired. Until they have completed it is important they fill out the volunteer paperwork to provide the group with insurance as safety and liability precaution. Chair Connealy mentioned that discussing Friends Groups on a future Board agenda should be considered.

b) Committee Reports -

i. Climate Change -

a. State Park Climate Signage:

Vice Chair Walsh asked if there are any signs out in any of the parks yet. Deputy Director Baker stated that there are none, and the division is still waiting for the final product and plans to have the signs out before the end of the calendar year. Vice Chair Walsh stated she was concerned with a new Governor coming in and if that will affect the process. Deputy Director Baker confirmed that it should not affect this project; and the goal is to have the signage in place by the end of the year.

b. Climate Impacts on State Parks:

Director Velasquez explained that division leadership attended a multi-agency community meeting related to drought impacts in Sierra County. The community meeting was very well attended with approximately 70 people.

Director Velasquez stated that lake level projections are not good, with water levels at Elephant Butte Reservoir to be at or less than 3.5% of total volume by late July/early August. Director Velasquez stated that State Forestry is preparing for a statewide burn ban and the division is already in Stage II Fire restrictions at most state parks. He went on to say that other state parks like Conchas Lake, Storrie Lake, Ute Lake, and lakes on the Pecos River will start the season with good to great lake levels. Director Velasquez stated that the lakes on the Rio Grande are the most impacted by drought right now.

Director Velasquez stated that projections indicated that lake levels on the Rio Grande could be historical lows, and that we may see extremely low lake levels at Eagle Nest Lake. At Eagle Nest Lake ice fishing was one of the shortest seasons since it opened in 2004. If any National Forests close due to fire severity, it will trigger closure of adjacent state parks, this has happened in past years. Division Marketing Manager Diego Munoz confirmed that the Board will receive division press releases. Manager Munoz hopes the members are all getting emails that go to them directly.

Chair Connealy asked if the division is keeping track of fees in a systematic way. Director Velasquez stated that the division tracks visitation and revenue, veteran passes, fire restrictions, and park closures.

Vice Chair Walsh mentioned that the Division Biologist should consider biological desertification. Director Velasquez mentioned it would be a challenge to do so, as it has been hard to keep some species alive even if they are an invasive species.

Manager Munoz stated that it is important to find other ways to bring

visitors in and promoting evening and night activities might be a great idea to keep up revenue.

ii. Outdoor Classrooms -

Member Everett mentioned there will be a SCORP focus group on April 1<sup>st</sup> and she is really looking forward to participating. Member Everett is happy to help lead the workshop and coordinate with anyone from the Board who might want to help host the focus group. Member Everett expressed that she experiences in working on planning for SCORP and has met with Coordinator Khalsa and other consultants regarding the next focus group. Member Everett wanted to emphasize that there is so much good information on the last SCORP plan that it can still be relevant to bring into the new plan. Deputy Director Baker thanked Member Everett for all the help and expertise she brings to these focus groups.

iii. Law Enforcement -

Director Velasquez gave a general update related to the State Personnel Office Architecture and the need for reclassification and pay alignment for Division law enforcement personnel. Director Velasquez stated that he is poised to support a law enforcement vehicle commute policy that will enable park officers to commute within a 50-mile radius of their duty station.

iv. Public/Private Funding and Advocacy -

Chair Connealy suggested that this committee be convened in the future. Director Velasquez stated that this committee and the Board can advocate year-round on behalf of the division. Deputy Director Baker brought up the Living Desert Zoo and Gardens State Park needs for private and public partnerships. She stated that the renovation of this park is a massive undertaking. Renovation of the zoo will be around \$100 million.

10) Closing Discussion

a) New Business -

The Board expressed no new business.

b) Next Meeting Date -

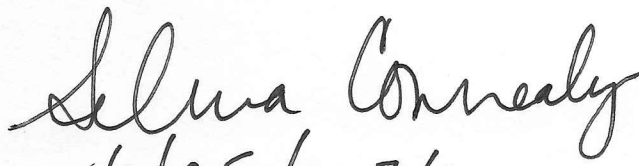
The Board discussed the option of the next meeting being in late June.

11) Public Comment -

Dustin Berg thanked everyone for allowing him to attend the meeting and he thanked the State Parks Division for all that they do.

12) Adjournment -

Chair Connealy entertained a motion to adjourn the meeting. Member Garcia made a motion to adjourn; Vice Chair Walsh seconded the motion. The motion carried, and the meeting was adjourned at 1:16 p.m.

  
6/25/2026