

State of New Mexico
Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department

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Toby Velasquez, Director
State Parks Division



New Mexico State Parks Advisory Board Meeting
Tuesday, September 30, 2025, at 10:00 A.M.
Rio Grande Nature Center State Park Visitor Center
2901 Candelaria Rd., NW Albuquerque, NM 87107 and via Microsoft Teams

- 1) Call to Order: The quarterly meeting was called to order at 10:06 a.m.
- 2) Roll Call: Director Velasquez took roll call with the following outcome:
 - Chair Selena Connealy - Present
 - Vice Chair Patricia Walsh – Absent/Excused
 - Member Patrick Killen - Present
 - Member Eileen Everett - Present
 - Member Stephanie Bestelmeyer - Present
 - Member Rodney Paris - Present
 - Member CJ Weigel - Present
 - Member Judith Polich - Present
 - Member Thomas Garcia - Present
- 3) Approval of Agenda: Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the agenda. Member Garcia made a motion to approve, and Member Killen seconded. The motion carried.
- 4) Approval of Minutes: Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the draft minutes. Member Garcia made a motion to approve the minutes as drafted, and Member Polich seconded the motion. The motion carried.
- 5) Public Comment: Sharon Evanich shared her interest in becoming a State Parks Advisory Board member. Ms. Evanich explained that she was being vetted by our Governors' Office of Boards and Commissions for an appointment to the Board. Ms. Evanich shared that she has been living in New Mexico for about 13 years and loves visiting and camping in state parks and is looking forward to being formally appointed to the Board.
- 6) Director's Report
 - a) Economic Impact Study and Contribution Analysis (EIS) (2019-2024) –

Director Velasquez gave an update on the EIS initiative and explained that the analysis was for the years of 2019- 2024. Director Velasquez stated that the EIS final report is supported by the EMNRD Cabinet Secretary and Governor's office. Director Velasquez stated that EIS has immediately aided his discussion with legislators and legislative committees. Director Velasquez stated that he has been direct and honest about the lack of support the division gets from legislatively derived General Fund support. For example, Director Velasquez stated that the analysis details that the state parks system supported \$266 million in our contributions to the GDP in 2024. Director Velasquez stated that this analysis includes the COVID-19 period when the state parks system was closed to public access. Director Velasquez went on to state that we can now talk about the state parks system's investment in our counties, and the additional recreation value and quality-of-life contributions are tremendous.

Member Polich asked if the support we're receiving from legislators is bipartisan, and Director Velasquez confirmed that the support was in fact bipartisan support. Member Everett asked what the talking points are and what should Board Members be bringing up when advocating about the EIS? Director Velasquez stated he would follow up and provide his talking points to the Board. Member Paris commented on how well Deputy Directors Richman and Baker did representing the Division at the Outdoor Economics Conference. Member Garcia asked what the specific amount of budget state parks are requesting will be? Director Velasquez stated that his request would be \$4.5 million more than the current FY26 General Fund budget (\$12.9 million).

Member Polich asked about the budget impacts of the new Veterans Lifetime Pass. Director Velasquez stated that we do not have enough preliminary data to show the impact, but we are tracking the issuance and use of these passes with the Dept. of Veteran Services and our reservation system contractor.

Director Velasquez stated that his overall request would be to keep our capital improvement funding predictable and at current level or as we request in our 5-year plan, improving our annual operating budget through increased General Fund support, and to continue to improve options and support recruiting new staff and retaining current staff. Member Garcia asked how can we piggyback if there were to be a new park? Director Velasquez stated if we want new parks, more dedicated funding and staff would need to be developed. Director Velasquez used Pecos Canyon State Park as an example. In 2008 Pecos Canyon State Park was designated but the operating, capital, and staff were not allocated until 2019. Member Everett commented on her deep appreciation for the many years of thinking that has brought into this process to get to this position, and all the efforts going into the economic analysis. One of the talking points she thinks is important to note during advocacy is that the Division has 22% less staff now than they did in 2008 and has more parks and higher visitation now. Chair Connealy asked if there were any legislators the Board should be reaching out to. Director Velasquez emphasized talking with any legislator that is willing to listen and may be willing to be our voice in the legislative budget process.

- b) Legislative Committee Presentations: Director Velasquez stated that he had presented to two interim legislative committees. Director Velasquez also stated that if any of the Board Members wanted to attend any upcoming meetings to let him know, he would be glad to have Board members attend. Director Velasquez stated that he anticipates presenting to the Military and Veteran Affairs Committee and Land Grant Committee. Director Velasquez also emphasized that communicating the work and success of the Division's Land and Water Conservation Fund program is also important. Chair Connealy asked when we will be meeting in front of the LFC. Director Velasquez stated sometime in November, and that it would likely be in Santa Fe. Chair Connealy commented you can register to give public comments at these meetings and that she has some ideas for targeting new legislators.

- c) Capital Improvement Projects Update –

Director Velasquez stated New Mexico State Parks is undertaking more capital improvement projects now than ever before. He stated that the Division is planning on spending \$40 million across the system in FY26. Director Velasquez stated that there is an interest in the Governor having a ribbon cutting at Fenton Lake State Park to showcase the new restrooms facilities and future restroom facility improvements across the system. Director Velasquez went on to state that the Division will invest in a long-term cultural and natural preservation and conservation of the state parks by replacing, renovating, and repairing outdoor restrooms across the system.

Director Velasquez talked about the cabins that will be opening soon at Coyote Creek State Park. Deputy Director Colleen Baker spoke more on the many projects that are being worked on in all the state parks. She started by complementing the entire staff of the Design and Development Bureau and CIP crew. Deputy Director Baker discussed various projects occurring at state parks throughout the system. Deputy Director Baker also discussed the climate exhibit project and stated that 4 out of 11 construction drawings are done and are being reviewed and the remaining ones will be completed very soon.

Director Velasquez provided that Navajo Lake State Park applied for a Heart of Stihl grant through the National Association of State Parks Directors and America State Parks and received the Southwest Region grant totaling \$12,500. This grant will be used for the removal of invasive Russian Olive on the banks of the San Juan River. This project started a conversation and attracted interest from the Forestry Division who now want to grow this project to clearing and habitat improvement with their funding and resources. Deputy Director Baker discussed the remediation of old sewer lagoons at Eagle Nest Lake State Park, a major environmental improvement project.

Member Weigel asked if the demolition was done at the North Dock located within Conchas Lake State Park. Deputy Director Baker stated that FY26 funds are programmed for the demolition and disposal of those facilities. Member Weigel stated that he remains concerned because the local community wants to see progress on this so that a new business opportunity could develop in that area. Member Paris stated that it is important for the Division to provide more public outreach to address misinformation. Director Velasquez agreed and assured the Board that more public outreach would be programmed for next year. Chair Connealy asked if State Parks receives funding out of Outdoor Legacy funds. Director Velasquez stated that the Division does not, but the Forestry Division does.

d) Veteran's Lifetime Pass Update –

Director Velasquez provided a quick update and stated that the Division has been applauded implementing the rulemaking, partnering with the Dept. of Veteran Services, and for making the benefit available in less than two months after House Bill 161 was signed by the Governor. It is a great opportunity to honor our New Mexico resident veterans with this benefit. Our legislators were happy that we could do this and that we could work well with the Dept. of Veteran Services.

The Board discussed that this is another example for advocacy being that the Division is an enterprise agency because over 5,000 lifetime veterans' passes have been issued. Director Velasquez discussed that the Division is identifying and coordinating to address misuse and abuse of the passes through the reservation system and in state parks. Member Everett asked about what type of abuse were being identified. Director Velasquez stated that multiple reservations were being made across the system up to six months in advance and is tying up sites. Director Velasquez stated that the Division will work on business rules to limit or eliminate abuse and that the Department of Veteran Services is in full support of this approach.

e) Personnel Vacancy Update –

Director Velasquez began with introducing Jason Dewall, the new Division Field Operations Bureau Chief. Bureau Chief Dewall gave a brief introduction and stated that he comes from California and worked for and retired from California State Parks. Bureau Chief Dewall stated that is excited to be here New Mexico and has noticed the support staff members give each other and is looking forward to being a part of that. All the Board members gave a nice introduction and background to Bureau Chief Dewall and welcomed him to New Mexico and the Division.

Administrative Bureau Chief Miche Garcia provided a personnel vacancy update. Overall, the Division has an 18% vacancy rate which has improved since the last Board meeting. The law enforcement position vacancy rate has significantly reduced from 42% to 27%. In addition, Deputy Director Baker and her team have developed five positions to add to the Design and Development Bureau. With the recent support of our upper management, we are going to make another attempt at using full-time positions that were associated with supporting seasonal hires. These five new positions will be for a civil engineer, a project planner, a land program manager, and a construction manager. The final position will be for a biologist position for the Program Support bureau; this position was lost a few years ago.

Director Velasquez stated that our goal is to repurpose 45 full-time positions that supported 136 seasonal hires, with a few of these positions being used to support Department support services. Director Velasquez stated that it's been difficult to recruit in rural areas. Member Weigel mentioned that he saw ads from the federal government advertising signing bonuses recruiting for ICE agents. bonus sign on to work for ICE. Member Weigel that this type of federal recruiting may negatively impact the Divisions recruiting efforts. Member Bestelmeyer asked if any of the new positions will involve education and stated that educating our youth about state parks is good exposure to kids about the lifestyle and may support recruitment. Director Velasquez said that in the Central Region a law enforcement position was transitioned to a Regional Interpretive Ranger and that the Division was creating a Division Education (statewide) Coordinator from an existing Santa Fe administrative position. Director Velasquez stated that he is committed to reestablishing the Divisions' Outdoor Education program and will ensure we have a career path for park, region, and statewide educators and interpreters.

Chair Connealy entertained a motion for a lunch break. Member Garcia motioned and Member Bestelmeyer seconded the motion. The motion carried. Chair Connealy called the Board meeting back to order at 12:11 p.m.

7) President's Report and Committee Reports

a) Discuss Board Advocacy Planning -

Chair Connealy stated that it is exciting for the Board to discuss and plan for what they can do individually and as a group related to advocacy with legislators and administration.

- i. Approved Plan and Action: The Board had a long discussion regarding their role and opportunities to advocate for the division operating budget, capital budget, and increased support for the division to recruit and retain staff. The Board agreed to establish standard talking points to ensure that they would all advocate for the same topics. Member Everett made a motion and amended it to request a one-page document that the Board would develop for future use with support from Director Velasquez. Member Garcia seconded the motion. The motion carried.

b) Committee Reports

- i. Climate Change: Member Polich discussed the loss of visitation and revenue due to drought and varying water levels. Member Polich described her visits to state parks and the significant impact of drought/infestation to the forest in parks like Hyde and Cimarron. Member Polich asked about plans to address these issues, and Director Velasquez stated that the division is communicating with the State Forestry Division regarding damage assessments and treatments for the most impacted forest areas in state parks.

- ii. Outdoor Classrooms: Member Bestelmeyer expressed her delight to see synergy for outdoor classrooms and more education in the parks. She believes that there are so many opportunities to grow this programming and it's one of the programs that the Board should advocate for to include new and more permanent division staff.
- iii. Law Enforcement: Director Velasquez gave a quick update and mentioned draft policy changes in process for overtime pay and commuting.
- iv. Public/Private Funding and Advocacy: Chair Connealy referenced that this discussion was addressed earlier on the agenda and no additional discussion was necessary.

8) Closing Discussion:

- a) New Business: No new business was presented by the Board.
- b) Next Meeting Date: The group discussed and tentatively agreed to Tuesday, December 2, 2025, in Santa Fe or Albuquerque for its next quarterly meeting.

9) Public Comment: No public comment was presented.

- 10) Adjournment: Chair Connealy entertained a motion to adjourn the meeting. Member Garcia made a motion and Member Paris seconded the motion. The motion carried and the meeting adjourned at 1:20 p.m.