

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
Wednesday, June 25, 2025, at 10:00 A.M.
Wendell Chino Building, State Parks Conference Room 2nd Floor
1220 South St. Francis Drive, Santa Fe, NM 87505 and via Webex

1) Call to Order: Chair Connealy called the meeting to order at 10:06 am.

2) Roll Call: Director Velasquez took roll call,

- Chair Selena Connealy – Present
- Vice Chair Patricia Walsh – Present
- Member Patrick Killen – Present
- Member Eileen Everett – Present
- Member Stephanie Bestelmeyer – Absent / Excused
- Member Rodney Paris – Absent/ Excused
- Member CJ Wiegel – Present (Webex)
- Member Judith Polich – Present
- Member Thomas Garcia – Present

Note: Member Everett and Member Wiegel both stated that they might have to leave the meeting early.

3) Approval of Agenda: Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the agenda, Member Garcia made a motion to approve the agenda, Member Polich seconded the motion. Motion carried.

4) Approval of Minutes: Chair Connealy and Vice Chair Walsh mentioned typos that needed corrections and suggested some clarifications that needed to be completed. Member Garcia made a motion to approve the minutes with corrections and Vice Chair Walsh seconded the motion. Motion carried.

5) Public Comment: No public comment.

6) Director's Report: Director Velasquez started with welcoming everyone to the meeting.

- a) Fiscal Year 26 Budget Update: The Division's FY26 budget was approved with \$300,000 more than FY25 in General Funds, which is a 2.4% increase. The FY26 budget included the 4% increase in Salaries for all state employees so that will not cut into the budget. Director Velasquez said that the budget is simply not enough to help the Division build more resilience moving forward. The general fund for FY26 is \$13.1 million dollars. The remaining 75% of the budget is self-generated, including some small federal funds and other government funds like GGRT. It was positive and not flat, but it doesn't meet the mark in terms of growth and resiliency. The State Parks Division (Division) is hoping that with the new fee structure, the self-generated funds will increase in revenue. So far, there has been a 34% increase in the last five months; however, the first two quarters are when most people make reservations. It is positive, but the Division still has the rest of the year to monitor with the hope of a new increased baseline of revenue.

House Bill 161 was discussed, it provides state park access and camping to all New Mexico resident veterans, and the Division anticipates a tremendous interest and use of this benefit. The Division is happy to honor them in that way, but it will impact self-generated revenues.

Director Velasquez added that the 4% increase in pay for employees is good for morale and retention and the Division appreciates this administration for following through with the promise of an increase in pay.

Chair Connealy asked if there is any implication with the federal budget. Director Velasquez stated that the Division receives three federal funds: Title 28, Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) funds, which nine of the state parks get because they are BOR properties; Land Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which did have some issues early on; however, the funds have since been released; and the third is the Coast Guard, which is part of the Recreation Boating Safety Grant (RBS). The RBS funding has been released; however, it has been put on hold due to a financial lawsuit with the NM Dept. of Justice. The funds will be issued to the Division as soon as it is resolved.

Member Polich asked how the Division would monitor the impact of House Bill 161. Director Velasquez stated that we probably won't see much of an impact until the following year. The Division will be able to track how many veterans make reservations. The Department of Veteran Services will also communicate how many veterans have applied for and received the benefit.

- b) Capital Improvement Projects Update: Director Velasquez gave a brief intro on the activity happening statewide with the capital funding. There are more capital investments than in the past, the Division is averaging over \$29 million dollars a year in investments over the last three years.

Deputy Director Colleen Baker gave a briefing on where the capital projects are taking place. Almost all state parks have something going on, including major repairs and new facilities. A few highlights were mentioned, like the new day use area at Navajo Lake State Park, vault toilets and housing at Fenton Lake State Park, Eagle Nest Lake State Parks lagoon remediation. Ms. Baker said that many other projects are ongoing at Coyote Creek, Hyde

Memorial, El Vado Lake, Conchas Lake, Ute Lake, Pecos Canyon, Sumner Lake, Villanueva, Pancho Villa, Leasburg Dam, and Oliver Lee State Parks.

Ms. Baker stated that Living Desert Zoo & Gardens State Park was impacted by a windstorm that caused a lot of damage to the building and surrounding area. The Division Design and Development Bureau is now in the middle of repairing the damage along with continuing with the framework plans that are underway.

Ms. Baker stated that the Division was allocated \$40 million in infrastructure capital improvement funds for fiscal year 2026. \$30 million is earmarked for vault toilet repair and replacement across the system. The Division is prioritizing and will start working on repairing and replacing all the vault toilets. The Division already had \$40 million dollars worth of projects in progress, and with the remaining \$10 million left, the Division will prioritize completing projects that are already in process. Director Velasquez is working on FY27 budget request for capital funds, which will be another \$40 million. The Division's five-year ICIP improvement capital plan totals \$181 million. Seeing this kind of tremendous support from administration since the Division received the ARPA funds has really opened opportunities to improve many state parks.

Director Velasquez stated that the Division will also try to build a capacity for our Design and Development team to develop five positions, which would complement the entire division. Three to four of those positions would be specifically focused on capital improvements. Member Polich asked if we could take the capital improvement funds to pay those salaries. Deputy Director Baker replied that the Division cannot. Member Everett asked a follow-up question regarding how the Division could take the momentum and support that exists for funding capital projects and help translate that into supporting staff. She asked if there is any way the Board can help with that. Director Velasquez stated that there is, and it will be a big part of the discussion later in the agenda. Vice Chair Walsh asked when the cabins will be ready to rent at Sugarite Lake State Park. Deputy Director Baker informed the Board it should be ready in spring 2026. Director Velasquez stated the new cabins at Coyote Creek State Park will be open by this fall/winter.

Chair Connealy was curious about the decision to invest the majority of the capital in vault toilets and what was the impetus for that. Director Velasquez stated that it was the governor's initiative that she wanted to invest in that as part of her commitment to supporting outdoor recreation. Most of the outdoor restrooms and facilities across the system are in poor shape and the investment will have a long-lasting impact. Vice Chair Walsh made a comment about the new campground in Sugarite Canyon State Park and said it was fantastic. Chair Connealy asked how many people are in the department managing these projects. Director Velasquez answered that there are eight in Design and Development.

- c) Veteran's Lifetime Pass Update: Deputy Director Angie Richman provided a brief status on the lifetime pass for veterans. The Division has been working very closely with the Department of Veteran Services to implement House Bill 161. The Division is ready to launch this by July 1, 2025. Deputy Director Richman provided a sample pass to show everyone. There have been 1,800 passes printed and ready to issue by the Department of Veteran Services. The Division also approved State Printing to print out 120,000 more passes because they expect a high volume of veterans to apply. A joint press release between the Division and

Veteran Services has been submitted to the Governor's office for approval. There is an FAQ on the website for both the Division and Dept. of Veteran Services. State Parks has also been working with Reserve America to make sure these passes can be used through the reservation system starting July 1, 2025. Chair Connealy asked if the passes included all camping, and Deputy Director Richman stated that all camping is included. Chair Connealy asked what challenge State Parks might be facing moving forward. Director Velasquez stated that moving forward there might be some issues such as getting the veterans to use the online reservation system, for the veterans to understand the time limit on how many days one can stay at park, but overall, he thinks once people get used to the new program and learning how it works there should be a smooth transition. Member Polich asked about how the Division could prevent a veteran from giving their passes to other family members to use. Director Velasquez stated that if a veteran was caught letting someone else use their pass, they will forfeit their benefit. Vice Chair Walsh asked if the Division is going to have issues with veterans demanding their passes when they got to a park. Deputy Director Richman assured her that state park staff have all been informed of the proper information to provide veterans regarding the new process they will have to follow to get the new pass from the Department of Veteran Services. In the meantime, any veteran who had an older pass can still use that pass.

- d) State Parks Economic Study Update: Director Velasquez stated that the result from the study is under review and that the Division may have a final product available for all board members before the end of the week which Director Velasquez will email. Director Velasquez stated that economic study is going to be one of the greatest tools that the Division has ever had, for board advocacy and self-advocacy, moving forward. So far, the department met with Dr. Winningham with the Arrowhead Center (New Mexico State University) and pulled a lot of data such as visitor data, revenue data, and capital improvement data. From the data that was from 2024, the report showed there were 5.28 million visitors, the economic impact of that was \$34.8 million. The recreation value was \$527.9 million. The conservation value was \$188.4 million, and the overall economic contribution was \$510.8 million, with the visitor spending at \$320.6 million. Director Velasquez emphasized that that was one year. This study covered fiscal years 2019-2024. The Division plans on using this study in the next legislative session, on social media, the radio, and a press release to highlight the economic impact that state parks have across the state. Board members discussed how they could all contribute to the cause, what they could advocate for, and what it would do to help the Division.
- e) Personnel Vacancy Update: Bureau Chief Miche Garcia provided a briefing on personnel vacancies. Overall, the Division currently has a 24.61% vacancy rate. This is a fluctuating rate considering some employees have moved from one park to another. Currently, the Central Region is at 78% filled (22% vacancy), Northwest is at 67% filled (33% vacancy), Northeast is at 73% filled (27% vacancy), Southwest region is at 74% filled (26% vacancy), Southeast region is at 77% filled (23% vacancy), and the Santa Fe office is at 78% filled (22% vacancy) status overall. There are several career fairs taking place soon. Ms. Garcia also noted that for the law enforcement position vacancy rate two weeks ago it was at a 55% vacancy, and now there is a 34% vacancy, but to be in a better spot the Division would like to be around 15% vacancy. There are a lot of actions happening such as our reclassification and hire packets going through as well. Chair Connealy expressed compliments to all state parks staff for all their accomplishments.

- 7) President's Report and Committee Reports: Chair Connealy shared that someone reached out to State Parks Bureau Chief Miche Garcia about the PAB Board and she wanted to serve as a board member. She has submitted her application and is waiting to hear back from the Governor's office. Chair Connealy also mentioned that the proposed Slot Canyon and Riverlands State Park was vetoed, which would have been another unfunded mandate for the Division.
- a) Discuss and Act on Committee Realignment: At the Board's last meeting, a discussion during Public/Private Partnership brought up changing the committee's name; however, since it was not on the last agenda, a motion could not take place. Now it is on the agenda so that members of the Board can move this action forward. Member Killen made a motion to change Public Private Partnership to Public Private Funding and Advocacy Committee. Member Polich seconded the motion. Chair Connealy asked if anyone would like to have a discussion. Member Everett asked if that included advocacy efforts by members by engaging legislators, and not just public and private funding and to request more funding to support more personnel and staff. Member Killen confirmed that intent, especially during the interim legislative periods where the Board can best support the Divisions needs. Motion Carried.
 - b) Committee Reports
 - i. Climate Change: No updates currently. Member Polich requested an update on signage when the Division gets the chance. Chair Connealy suggested State Parks provide an update on climate impact, since over the last few years the Division has experienced drastic climate conditions. Director Velasquez shared that right now the Division is working on a multi-state agency approach to a drought response plan related to low water levels at Elephant Butte Lake and the Rio Grande. Elephant Butte Lake is projected to see its lowest levels in the last 55 years. Heron Lake is projected to see its lowest levels since it was filled. Member Polich stated that the Division needs to remind visitors about the heat and that is important to remind our visitors about heat stroke and heat related illness.
 - ii. Outdoor Classrooms: Member Everett mentioned she would like to keep her role on supporting the outdoor education section of the SCORP program. Since the contract for SCORP is being reviewed. Member Everett stated she is happy to volunteer to host and facilitate conversation to support outdoor education.
 - iii. Law Enforcement: No updates other than the Field Training Officer program is being developed.
 - iv. Public/Private Partnerships: Chair Connealy indicated the new name for the Public Private Funding Advocacy Committee. Member Killen and Chair Connealy met with Director Velasquez and Samantha Kao, the legislative policy/EMNRD policy advisor, to discuss the interest the Board has in being advocates for the budget, which Ms. Kao supports. Director Velasquez and Ms. Kao met with the Cabinet Secretary. Next the Governor's office will respond, at which time Director Velasquez will have more directions to give to the Board.
- 8) Closing Discussion
- a) New Business: No new business.
 - b) Next Meeting Date: The board discussed mid-September and Chair Connealy stated that she would follow up with more details.

- 9) Public Comment: No public comment.
- 10) Adjournment: Member Polich made a motion to adjourn, Member Garcia seconded. Motion carried, and the meeting adjourned at 11:47 a.m.