

**Michelle Lujan Grisham**  
Governor

**Melanie A. Kenderdine**  
Cabinet Secretary

**Ben Shelton**  
Deputy Cabinet Secretary

**Erin Taylor**  
Deputy Cabinet Secretary

**Toby Velásquez**  
State Parks Division Director



**New Mexico State Parks Advisory Board Meeting  
Wednesday, March 26, 2025, at 10:00 AM  
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 Selena Connealy called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.
- 2) Roll Call - Director Velasquez conducted the following roll call:
  - Chair Selena Connealy – Present
  - Vice Chair Judith Polich – Present (Webex)
  - Member Patrick Killen – Present
  - Member Eileen Everett – Absent/Excused
  - Member Stephanie Bestelmeyer – Absent/Excused
  - Member Rodney Paris – Absent/Excused
  - Member CJ Wiegel – Present
  - Member Patricia Walsh – Present
  - Member Thomas Garcia – Present
- 3) Approval of Agenda - Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the agenda. Member Killen made a motion to approve the agenda and member Garcia seconded the motion. Motion carried.
- 4) Approval of Minutes - Chair Connealy noted needed spelling revisions. Member Wiegel made a motion to approve the minutes with revisions as stated, and Member Walsh seconded the motion. Motion carried.
- 5) Election of Officers –
  - a) Discussion and Action: Board members had a discussion on retaining the current Chair and electing a new Vice Chair. Member Killen made a motion to re-elect Selena Connealy as Chair and member Patricia Walsh as the new Vice Chair. CJ Wiegel seconded the motion. Motion was carried out to approve the election of Chair Connealy and Vice Chair Walsh. Vice Chair Polich suggested that due to her other commitments next year and unavailability, she requested interest from other members to fill this role. Vice Chair Polich nominated Member Walsh to be the new Vice Chair of the Parks Advisory Board. The Board voted and nomination was supported unanimously by the Board.
- 6) Open Meetings Act Resolution:

- a) Discussion and Action - Member Wiegel made a motion to approve the draft Open Meetings Act Resolution, and Member Killen seconded the motion. Member Garcia suggested to make it easier to find the information about Board meetings on the Boards/Division webpage. Motion carried.

7) Public Comment: There was no public comment.

8) Director's Report:

- a) Legislative Session 2025 Update -

Director Velasquez gave an update on the legislative session and stated that two bills passed that would impact the agency. Director Velasquez also stated that the agency is tracking House Bill 336 which supports retired PERA law enforcement officers to return to work. Member Garcia asked if the retiree would have to return to the agency they worked for before or could they choose another agency to work for. Director Velasquez stated that if it is a PERA agency the return-to-work employee had the choice of where to return to work.

Director Velasquez discussed House Bill 219 and explained that in 2023 a House memorial passed and requested a feasibility study for a parcel of property owned by the agency to be evaluated to be a state park. The feasibility study was completed in July 2024 and supported three alternatives: 1) No action; 2) Develop a state park recreation area; 3) Develop a full-service state park. House Bill 219 passed the House and Senate and supported alternative number three. The bill initially had \$9 million dollars attached for capital funding, but that funding was taken out of the bill. Director Velasquez stated that the agency would have to use the \$40 million in separate capital funding to develop the new state park. Member Polich asked what the legislature's rationale for them to take the \$9 million in capital funds out of the bill. Director Velasquez believes it happened because of the worries surrounding federal funds under the current federal administration. Member Killen stated that it's good to expand the parks system but was disappointed in the legislators for not giving the proper appropriations to develop and operate a new park. Member Killen went on to state that he hopes that the 2026 legislative session will not put another unfunded mandate on to state parks. Member Garcia stated that based on his experience, the funds may have been stripped because it will take time to administratively prepare the park for development and suggested that the Board plan to lobby legislators on this matter to keep them aware of how important it is to have the proper funding to support the mandate. Member Killen supported Member Garcia's suggestion and emphasized that starting the conversation now is very important.

Director Velasquez stated that he believes this can be a call to action for the Board. Vice Chair Walsh noted that she has witnessed just how hard it is on the Division staff, when they don't have enough staff to run the park. She went on to state that it is vital for our legislators to provide the funding needed. Chair Connealy proposed having a committee to take on the task. Chair Connealy wants to better understand and strategize their approach.

Member Killen suggested that the Board combine Public/Private Partnerships with Advocacy. Vice Chair Walsh asked Director Velasquez if the staff shortage is due to low salaries. Director Velasquez stated that there is not much interest in engaging state government work, salaries are not at market value, and there is a general lack of interest in working outdoors or in law enforcement. Director Velasquez stated that the Division is recruiting and there is good interest in our Santa Fe-based positions, while rural areas are difficult to recruit for. Director Velasquez went on to state that the Division hopes to help or provide a way to engage federal workers who lost their jobs to stay in their field of work and use this approach to reduce division position vacancies.

The third bill discussed was House Bill 161 which provides free unlimited day use and camping for New Mexico resident veterans. Director Velasquez provided that as a business enterprise agency, this bill could significantly impact our division's self-generated revenues. The bill provides this benefit to no less than 142,000 New Mexico resident veterans. Director Velasquez stated that the division is glad to honor veterans in this way and will work hard to ensure the benefits will be implemented by no later than July 1, 2025. The Board was told about the list of administrative and operational tasks that would now be needed to implement the benefits, such as rulemaking, interagency work with the Department of Veteran Services (DVS), communications, printing, web revisions, reservation system adjustments, and clarification regarding language in the bill.

Member Wiegel asked how all the issues are going to be resolved. Director Velasquez stated the division was already working with DVS on rule and procedures. Bureau Chief Jared Langenegger stated that he has already developed a draft for the rulemaking. Director Velasquez stated that the key concerns are payment for utilities, payment for reservation related fees, stay limits, and certification and distribution of the passes. Member Killen inquired about just how much revenue State Parks would lose. Director Velasquez provided a revenue loss projection table based on varying percentages of use by the eligible veteran population. Chair Connealy commented that likely more veterans will use the benefit in the future. Member Killen stated he strongly supports our veterans but has major concerns about the unfunded mandate from this legislation. Member Garcia stated that House Bill 161 states that "we shall provide" and asked if that means every veteran will get some kind of pass and who will provide these passes. Director Velasquez stated that since the bill is unclear and does not specify how the process will be handled, he is hoping to get that resolved with DVS through rulemaking. Member Garcia offered to assist with the process and give his insight since he is a veteran and is a former Chair of the Veterans Legislative Committee. Chair Connealy asked if rulemaking could assign duties to DVS, and Director Velasquez stated that the division would have to work with them on our rulemaking. Vice Chair Walsh asked if there was any recognition from legislatures related to the impact to the division, and Director Velasquez stated that there was a Fiscal Impact Report providing that analysis to legislators.

b) Fiscal Year 25/26 Budget Update -

Director Velasquez stated that the division is entering their fourth quarter of fiscal year 2025 and that the New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration (DFA) identified a change in procurement and how we deal with payment to and receipt of revenue from our reservation system contractor. DFA has determined that we need to establish procurement to receive gross revenues and not net revenues. This means we have to encumber approximately \$1 million for fiscal year 26, which was not in our fiscal year 2026 budget request.

Director Velasquez stated that the division received \$42 million in capital improvement funds from the 2025 legislative session. Director Velasquez stated that \$2 million of these funds were provided to the DFS Local Government Division for a new visitor center at Sugarite Canyon State Park without any notice or knowledge of the division. Chair Connealy asked if a visitor center could be built for that much and Director Velasquez said that it is behind the backlog of other capital projects and the funding has a three-year option for use. Director Velasquez stated that this is the most capital improvement funds that the division has ever received through legislative appropriation.

Deputy Director Colleen Baker stated that last fiscal year the division expended approximately \$32 million on capital improvements and has about \$16 million left from the fiscal year 2025 capital improvement appropriation. Deputy Director Baker pointed out that the division is at capacity on all levels, and there are many projects to cover with little time and a small team of staff. She also stated that all of the division external contractors are at capacity. Vice Chair Walsh asked if remodeling the historic building at Sugarite Canyon State Park would make more sense instead of building a whole new visitor center. She stated that it wouldn't be so time-consuming if the division took that route. Deputy Director Colleen Baker stated that it is an option, but the concern is the many capital projects already ahead of this.

c) Capital Improvement Projects Update –

Director Velasquez introduced the new Division Design and Development Bureau Chief Ryan Darr to the Board. Ryan gave his introduction and said he is excited to be with the agency and is excited to work on the capital funds the agency has for next year.

Deputy Director Colleen Baker gave a briefing on what projects are taking place and gave the Board an update on several park projects ongoing across the state parks system.

Member Wiegel asked about the work being done at Conchas Lake. Deputy Director Baker confirmed that the division is moving forward with actions to demolish and remove the old North Dock Marina buildings pending a wastewater assessment.

Chair Connealy commented just how extraordinary division staff is to be taking on all these projects and they have done such a great job. Member Garcia asked if the division would get any FEMA funding for state parks impacted by the Hermit Peak Calf Canyon Fire. Director Velasquez stated that for Morphy Lake State Park we are due to receive approximately \$163,000 in fire damage recovery funds.

Director Velasquez highlighted the sewage lagoons at Eagle Nest Lake SP as major project that is cleaning up a decades long environmental issue.

d) State Parks Fees Implementation Update:

Bureau Chief Langenegger provided that the recent fee changes have resulted in approximately a 20% increase in revenues. The division expects that this revenue will grow as we enter the peak recreation season. Bureau Chief Langenegger stated that there have not been a lot of complaints about the changes since they have been implemented, he did clarify that the division is working on the implementation of House Bill 161. Deputy Director Richman stated that we've been responsive to complaints from nonresidents because they feel the annual camping pass is priced too high. Director Velasquez indicated that we would keep the Board updated throughout the remainder of the calendar year. Chair Connealy commented that it is exciting to hear that revenue is up.

e) State Parks Economic Study Update:

Bureau Chief Jared Langenegger and Deputy Director Richman gave an update on the economic study. Currently NMSU has submitted a rough draft, and the division has asked for some changes and asked to provide what a dollar spent by visitors means as far as impact to the state economy. They stated that NMSU is finalizing the study this fiscal year and that they have been great to work with. Director Velasquez noted that this study is going to be a great tool for the division's advocacy efforts for more support with human and financial resources.

f) Personnel Vacancy Update:

Administrative Bureau Chief Miche Garcia provided an updated division personnel vacancy report. Ms. Garcia stated that the division is currently at a 25.16% vacancy rate. Bureau Chief Garcia stated that the agency has several potential hires in the hiring process that will drop the vacancy rate significantly. Vice Chair Walsh suggested that the focus be on hiring more non-law enforcement staff so that the law enforcement staff could be used more specifically for those duties. Director Velasquez confirmed the approach as one of the agencies hiring strategies. Chair Connealy added that there are many good things happening in the parks given the current vacancy rate.

9) President's Report and Committee Reports:

a) Committee Reports -

- i. Climate Change: Vice Chair Walsh and Member Polich provided an update. Member Polich was very pleased with all the work of the agency. Vice Chair Walsh noted that at Mesilla Valley State Park they had a three-

day Earth to Sky Workshop that agency employee Alex Mares helped facilitate. The workshop had 13 participants, and six of them were from the Navajo Nation. Two of the participants were from NASA. Chair Connealy asked for an update on the climate change signage project. Deputy Director Colleen Baker said implementation would occur soon and she was happy with the final product. She went on to state that the agency plans to have all the signage implemented this calendar year.

- ii. Outdoor Classrooms: Chair Connealy announced Citizen Science Day is April 25, 2025, and note that the Governor Lujan Grisham has signed the proclamation. Chair Connealy stated that Wild Friends will be hosting an event called The City Nature Challenge. Chair Connealy said it is a bio blitz. Deputy Director Angie Richman asked for the information so that the agency could help market the event.
  - iii. Law Enforcement: Deputy Director Angie Richman stated Chief Maes has been drafting program policies and procedures related to taking home vehicles and overtime pay out.
  - iv. Public/Private Partnerships: Member Killen discussed the consideration of changing this committee name to Public/Private Funding Advocacy Committee to bring more awareness to the needs of the agency. Member Killen made a motion and Member Polich seconded the motion. Motion carried. Chair Connealy facilitated discussion related to interest in participating with this committee. Member Wiegel said he would participate and did Vice Chair Walsh. Member Garcia pointed out that the vote was not valid because it was not a discussion and action item on the approved agenda. The Board agreed with Member Garcia and committed to bringing this topic back for discussion and action for the next Board meeting.
- 10) Closing Discussion:
- a) New Business: Member Garcia stated his interest in giving the Board Chair the approval to send out advocacy related information on behalf of the Board and to bring back the Public/Private Partnership Committee discussion and action item.
  - b) Next Meeting Date: To be determined for the week of June 9, 2025, or June 25, 2025.
- 11) Public Comment: There was no public comment.
- 12) Adjournment: Chair Connealy entertained a motion to adjourn. Member Garcia made the motion and Member Killen seconded. Motion carried and the meeting was adjourned at 12:20 P.M.