

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
Thursday, June 25, 2026, at 10:30 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:
Chair Connealy called the meeting to order at 10:39 a.m.
- 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 Stephaine Bestelmeyer - Present
 - Member Rodney Paris - Present
 - Member CJ Weigel - Absent Excused
 - Member Judith Polich - Present
 - Member Thomas Garcia - Absent Excused
 - Member Sharon Evanich - Present
- 3) Approval of Agenda:
Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the agenda. Vice Chair Walsh made a motion to approve the agenda, Member Polich seconded the motion, and the motion carried.
- 4) Approval of Minutes: Chair Connealy entertained a motion to approve the minutes. Vice Chair Walsh made a motion to approve the minutes with amendments, Member Everett seconded the motion, and the motion carried.
- 5) Public Comment:
There was no public participation.
- 6) Director's Report:
 - i. Discuss Legislative Interim Committee Engagement - Director Velasquez began with welcoming everyone to the Rio Grande Nature Center. Director Velasquez stated that legislative season is approaching again, and this will be unique due to the administration transition. Director Velasquez discussed that the division is strategically approaching the interim committees to discuss how vulnerable the agency is to economy and environment. With the cost of gas, marina fuel, extreme environmental conditions and economy impact throughout the state it is imperative to message that the agencies enterprise position is weakened. Member Polich asked if it is for a legislative change to change the status of state parks as enterprise agency. Director Velasquez stated it would have to be an overall legislative change and noted some states do not charge for use of state parks and are fully subsidized by their legislature. Director Velasquez also

stated that might not be the best option for and favors dedicated general fund support. Director Velasquez stated that he will continue to advocate for improved and predictable general and capital funding. Director Velasquez encouraged the Parks Advisory Board to continue lobbying the agency. Vice Chair Walsh asked for more information regarding the interim legislative committees. Director Velasquez explained that they are bipartisan groups of lawmakers who meet between regular legislative sessions to study state issues, investigate policy problems, and draft legislation. Director Velasquez committed to keeping the Board apprised of legislative forums that they could attend to advocate for the agency.

Member Polich asked if there were any revenue comparisons from last fiscal year to this fiscal year showing the impact on revenue. Director Velasquez stated that this information is being compiled and that he will share that information with the Board. Member Polich asked if the reduction in revenue was significant, would park staff have to be laid off. Director Velasquez stated staff will not be affected as far as losing their jobs; however, it would mean that our legislators will have to commit to increasing their General Fund allocation. Chair Connealy stated she would make a list of talking points to support the agency. Member Polich asked what percentage increase would be appropriate for General Fund, Director Velasquez stated that it needs to account for the increase cost of doing business, and loss of revenues to economy and environment.

Chair Connealy asked if agency will submit the budget to the current governor, and Director Velasquez confirmed that the budget process for FY28 is currently being filed and processed under the current administration and he pointed out that this year state government must adhere to the 50% rule which means agencies can only expend 50% of their budget from July 1 – December 31. Member Polich stated that it would be good for state parks to have a governor who has a passion for the environment. Chair Connealy also mentioned that the state has capital investment funds and hopes state parks continue to get these funds. Chair Connealy also mentioned she will keep an eye on interim meetings and will communicate with the Board about participation.

- ii. Fiscal Year 27/28 Budget Update - Director Velasquez gave an update on budget, the FY27 capital funds are \$20 million. In FY26, \$40 million was allocated for outdoor restroom improvements across the state parks system. The operating budget was increased by 19%, which is the single, largest fiscal year increase that has occurred in the last 23 years. Director Velasquez confirmed that the agency is prioritizing keeping this momentum going. Another priority is aligned pay for our field staff to improve recruitment and retention. Director Velasquez stated that for the FY28 operating request his objective is to request and justify a 13% or approximately \$2 million dollars. For FY28 the capital improvement budget request is \$55 million; \$40 million statewide, \$12 million will be used to invest in the Living Desert Zoo & Gardens State Park, and \$3 million to replace patrol vessels and vehicles.
- iii. Capital Improvement Projects Update - Deputy Director Colleen Baker gave an update on capital projects. Before she started, Director Velasquez wanted to mention that in the last five years the agency has invested over \$200 million statewide. He stated that is more capital improvement investments than any other period in the history of the system. Deputy Director Baker began by thanking her team for the amazing job, and everything that has gone into getting the work done in the time it needed to get done. She stated that all the vaulted outdoor restroom facilities are ordered and are nearing the end of completing all compliance and installation will begin in July. Member Evanich asked if we are replacing all the old ones or getting all new facilities, Deputy Director Baker confirmed most of the facilities are being replaced. State Parks is evaluating boat ramps right now, as well, and making sure we are providing the needs of boaters. Deputy Director Baker stated that the housing project at Fenton Lake is ongoing, an ADA access project is nearing completion at Brantley Lake, and the agency continues work on the Conchas Lake State Park lease agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Deputy Director Baker went on to state that the access road to Leasburg Dam is completed, Living Desert Zoo and Gardens perimeter fence is nearing completion, and electrical improvements are in progress there. Deputy Director Baker stated that two ongoing priorities for Pecos Canyon also are to install and upgrade outdoor restrooms and to secure office and a visitor point of contact. The Pecos Canyon Gas Station is a potential space in the Village of Pecos. Other noted projects were the new comfort station at Eagle Nest Lake, cabins at Coyote Creek, and road/cabins at Sugarite Canyon. Member Evanich asked about the issues with the water line at one of the campgrounds and what actions will be taken to solve that issue, and Deputy Director Baker stated it is being evaluated by staff. Vice Chair Walsh asked about the boardwalk at Sugarite, and Deputy Director Baker confirmed that it is being assessed and will be replaced. Member Everett expressed concern with staff getting burnt out with so many projects, and Deputy Director Baker confirmed that we must be aware of that and lean on contractors extensively and continue to fill the new bureau positions.

- iv. **Personnel Vacancy Update - Administrative Services Bureau Chief Miche Garcia** presented an update on the personnel vacancy. The current vacancy rate is 19.49%; overall vacancies have been filled and are keeping steady. Some of the regions are at full capacity and now there are more staff in the parks. Marketing Manager Diego Munoz gave an update on the new Education Coordinator who will be starting July 20th, he stated that Gianna Farrell is going to be the new Division Education Coordinator. Vice Chair Walsh asked if the regional interpreters would remain or will it change now that the new coordinator is coming in. Director Velasquez confirmed that the regional interpreters will remain with their regions, and the intent is to grow the program with park and regional interpreters. Member Everett mentioned she was in a SCORP meeting last week and one of the things they talked about was how to bring more educators to state parks. Member Everett mentioned that one strategy may be to build a team of traveling interpreters. Members of the Board expressed their interest in supporting this program initiative.
- v. **Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan Update - Deputy Director Baker** gave an update; it is moving along well and there have been some approvals from the consultant. The division is on target to get all the drafts in compliance with the new administration. The public outreach survey had around 3,250 people take the survey. The goal was to be around 4500; however, they fell a little short of their goal. Chair Connealy mentioned the outreach was good even though the response total was lower than targeted.
- vi. **Marketing Program Update - Marketing Manager Diego Munoz** gave a presentation on what is going on with marketing and stated that one fun thing happening is that state parks will be getting a brand ambassador/mascot. With AI on the rise Marketing Manager Munoz noticed people were creating various mascots for the agency, this was an eye-opener for him. Marketing Manager Munoz thought it would be a good idea to have an actual mascot for the parks. He introduced Ranger Rio as the first official NM State Parks mascot. Chair Connealy asked how they would introduce the new mascot. Mr. Munoz mentioned with the state fair coming up they would like to present the new mascot at that time. Mr. Munoz wanted to also mention how well of a job Deputy Director Richman did working on the survey and the work done with Qualtrics. Two main things people mentioned for as needs in the parks are upgraded showers and Wi-Fi, and 94% of the survey conducted have had good reviews.

Director Velasquez mentioned how proud he is of his team and all the work they have done and are doing. He feels that so much progress has been made and they moved out of a survival stage into growth.

Member Everett proposed an act to reach out to legislative committees before the interim meetings and to reach out to the chair of the committee in Roswell. Chair Connealy mentioned she will send out an email to the Board with information on who to reach out to and who will be on the committee. Member Everett stated that it's essential to reach out to these legislative committees to inform them of the great job the division is doing and that they need to be supported legislatively.

Chair Connealy proposed a short break at 12:23PM, and the meeting reconvened at 12:34PM.

Chair Connealy asked about the staff status at Mesilla Valley State Park. Director Velasquez stated that he had repurposed an existing FTE to hire a Park Manager there. Mesilla Valley has not had a park leadership position since the Park Superintendent position was cut by previous administration.

7) President's Report and Committee Reports

A) Committee Reports:

- i. **Climate Change - State Park Climate Signage Project Update:** Deputy Director Baker gave an update on climate signage, and eleven parks should have a final product by next spring in the first round and the others later.
- ii. **Outdoor Classrooms - Member Everett** stated the consultant they have been working with has been excellent. She has been a great coordinator with the engagement on outdoor education collaborating with many programs like SCORP, and Kids in Parks. Member Bestelmeyer agreed. At the last meeting held they discussed how they could bring more funding to outdoor education. Their goal is to really grow the program over the next five years and really bring back outdoor education.
- iii. **Law Enforcement - Administrative Bureau Chief Miche Garcia** helped put together talking points on law enforcement vacancy rates, Director Velasquez stated this time last year law enforcement vacancy rate was at 55% that was one of the highest rates ever for State Parks. Currently the vacancy rate is 20%, which is a huge reduction. Out of 79 positions

72 are filled. He went on to state that recruitment continues, and a few positions have been reclassified to non-law enforcement. Chair Connealy asked about the vehicle commute policy for LE, and he stated that it is on hold until he can ensure that the agency can fund the recurring costs. Member Polich asked about the crime level in state parks and if it is up or down. Director Velasquez stated that crime in state parks is reflective of what is happening statewide, and the incidents are getting worse.

- iv. Public/Private Funding and Advocacy - Member Killen spoke about upcoming and asked if the LFC has reached out to the parks yet for a presentation. Director Velasquez stated that Senator Lanier has reached out to Director Velasquez, but nothing has been set up yet. Vice Chair Walsh asked just how important their input would be to the LFC committee. Member Killen stated it is super important. Chair Connealy confirmed that she will get information out to everyone on the Board regarding the interim committees.

8) Closing Discussion:

- i. New Business - Director Velasquez stated if there is anything that the Board wants to add to the next Board meeting agenda, to please share those interests. Chair Connealy stated she would like to have a friends group topic on the agenda.
- ii. Next Meeting Date – The Board tentatively agreed to September 30, 2026, at Hyde Memorial State Park.

9) Public Comment:

There was no public participation.

10) Adjournment:

Chair Connealy entertained a motion to adjourn, Member Polich made a motion to adjourn at 1:20PM, Member Killen seconded the motion, and the motion carried.