

State of New Mexico
Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department

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Governor

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Cabinet Secretary

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Deputy Cabinet Secretary

Toby Velasquez, Director
State Parks Division



New Mexico State Parks Advisory Board Meeting

Wednesday, December 6, 2023 @ 11:00 AM
Wendell Chino Building - State Parks Division –
Conference Room 2nd Floor
1220 South St. Francis Drive, Santa Fe, NM 87505
and via Webex

1. **Call to Order:** Chair Connealy called the Parks Advisory Board (Board) meeting to order at 11:04 a.m.
2. **Roll Call:** Director Toby Velaquez called roll.

Board Members Present:

- Selena Connealy - Chair
- Judith Polich – Vice Chair
- Stephanie Bestelmeyer
- Rodney Paris
- CJ Wiegel
- Thomas Garica
- Eileen Everett
- Patrick Killen

Board Member Absent:

- Patricia Walsh

3. **Approval of Agenda:** Chair Connealy invited a motion to approve the agenda as drafted, motion made by Member Killen, seconded by Member Garcia. All Board members voted in favor of approving the agenda as drafted.
4. **Approval of Minutes:** Chair Connealy invited a motion for minutes to be approved as amended. Member Everett made the motion, Member Paris seconded the motion. All Board members voted in favor of approving the minutes as drafted and amended.
5. **Director's Report: Toby Velasquez, Division Director**

a) **2024 Legislative Session Discussion**

There was a short conversation about the upcoming legislative session and Director Velasquez confirmed that the State Parks Division (Division) has no legislation planned. Director Velasquez stated that the Division is focused on advocating for support of the

Division's FY25 budget request. Director Velasquez detailed that the FY25 budget requests also supports thirty-five (35) existing positions to be repurposed within the Division. Director Velasquez also stated that the Division requested more capital improvement funding than we have asked for in prior fiscal years.

For the record, Vice Chair Polich joined the Board meeting in person at 11:15 a.m.

Member Everett asked Director Velasquez to remind the Board of what the FY25 budget request is and how it compares to prior budget requests. Director Velasquez stated that in the personnel category it increases our request for funding by approximately \$4 million in General Funds. Director Velasquez also provide that the capital outlay funding normally ranges between \$2-4 million dollars in past years, however, this request was increased to \$10 million because the Division has nearly exhausted our \$20 million in ARPA funding. ARPA funding will be expended by the end of FY25, and other capital improvement funds will be needed to continue to invest in park infrastructure. Director Velasquez stated that the Division has committed ARPA funds at \$14 million and have \$6 million remaining to get used by the end of FY25.

Member Wiegel asked Director Velasquez where the Division currently was with employee vacancies. Director Velasquez replied that as of right now about 25-30%. Director Velasquez stated that the Division was looking forward to the upcoming legislative session and anticipates that there will be legislation regarding the Land Water and Conservation Fund Program, the legislation will likely seek to establish stateside match funds for eligible entities to apply for.

Chair Connealy asked if there was anything the Board could do to help support the session. Director Velasquez emphasized the importance of the Board's advocacy and that he would keep the Board up to date on opportunities for them to speak in support of Division efforts.

b) State Parks Fees Presentation & Discussion

Field Operations Bureau Chief Jared Langenegger provided a PowerPoint presentation regarding the State Parks Fees Study, contemplated fees adjustments, upcoming public meetings, and potential administrative rule changes to support this work. Bureau Chief Langenegger discussed the following during his presentation:

The Division is an executive branch agency charged with providing recreational opportunities for the citizens of and visitors to New Mexico. The agency's mission is to protect and enhance natural and cultural resources, provide first-class recreational and education facilities and opportunities, and promote public safety to benefit and enrich the lives of visitors. The broad scope of the State Park's mission includes managing and maintaining 35 state parks in 25 of 33 counties all with unique qualities that attract over 5 million visitors per year. The Division administers and operates the associated and extensive recreational infrastructure and public services required to meet and exceed visitor expectations. Additionally, the Division is charged with oversight of the New Mexico Boat Act to promote safety for persons and property in and connected with the use, operation, and equipment of vessels and to promote the uniformity of laws across all navigable waters in our state.

As an enterprise agency the Division relies heavily on revenue generated through entrance pass sales, concessions, and other revenue streams to accomplish its mission. Division Park fees are set by rule and have not kept pace with inflation leaving New Mexico behind other surrounding states. Camping fees for sites with utilities have not changed in nearly 25 years. Boat registration fees,

which fund our statewide boating safety, education, and enforcement program, have not changed in nearly 40 years.

The principal objective of the fees study was to explore options to adjust fees, improve our agencies enterprise position, and still provide affordable state park access for New Mexico citizens and visitors to our state. A team of highly qualified State Parks staff with over 200 years of combined outdoor recreation experience gathered information, evaluated options, and provided recommendations. The following recommendations were discussed and are based on the need to address associated fees based on operational issues, inflation, and attaining regional parity with parks and outdoor recreation agencies within our state and surrounding states.

- 1) Eliminate day-use fees for New Mexico residents: Elimination of day-use fees will provide a safe and managed nearby state park for residents to recreate ensuring equitable access to improve quality of life for visitors.
- 2) Increase to a \$10 non-resident day-use fee: Implementation of a non-resident day use fee ensures that non-residents are supporting and contributing to the upkeep of park facilities and operations.
- 3) Absorb primitive camping fee category into the developed camping fee category which eliminates the differentiated fee schedule for camping: All visitors have access to various amenities including improved roads, solid waste service, water service, restroom facilities, and public safety officers.
- 4) Increase camping fee to the base of \$20 per night per vehicle: Currently the State Parks camping fee is \$10 per night, and this fee has not changed in nearly 25 years.
- 5) Increase utility fees to \$10 per night per utility and implement a dump station fee. Currently, the Division charges \$4 per night for electric and sewer but does not charge for water. Larger recreational vehicles and an increased demand for utility services place a strain on aging infrastructure. The inflation adjusted cost for each utility is \$7.34. Additionally, State Parks does not currently charge for use of RV dump stations in parks.
- 6) Eliminate the Annual Camping Pass (ACP): State Parks is one of only four states to offer an ACP. This pass encourages non-recreational use of parks, reduces access to high demand camping sites, and allows manipulation of the reservation system resulting in negative impacts to other customers.
- 7) Adjust Living Desert Zoo & Gardens State Park entrance fees for inflation and regional parity: This is a unique site within the system, as it is our only zoological facility. While having only an average visitation of 35,595 visitors per year, the overhead to maintain animal care and security standards requires significant operational and capital investments.
- 8) Adjust Smokey Bear Historical Park fees for inflation and regional parity: While Smokey Bear Historical Park is operated by the EMNRD - State Forestry Division, the associated fee structure for this is included within Division administrative rules.
- 9) Adjust boat registration fees for inflation and regional parity: New Mexico's boat registration fees have not been adjusted in nearly 40 years.

10) Implement a \$5 non-motorized vessel launch fee: Non-motorized vessels do not require registration, yet they benefit from boat access and infrastructure, and safety and emergency services primarily funded through motorboat vessel registrations.

Bureau Chief Langenegger emphasized that any adjustments would follow all New Mexico Administrative Rule procedures including several public meetings, with public outreach being held across the state and public comment being taken for no less than 30 days in various formats.

Director Velasquez described that New Mexico's State Parks are essential to the quality of life for residents and non-residents alike, as they provide protection of natural and cultural resources and an array of opportunities and experiences. State Parks are critical to economic stimulus and development and are a driving force in New Mexico's economy. As State Parks celebrates its 90th anniversary this year, consideration and implementation of these recommendations will ensure that our State Parks system is more resilient to change and can better fulfill its mission for generations to come.

Member Paris asked what the MEO's (Marine Enforcement Officer) starting salary is, and provided that if it's at or near \$25 dollars an hour, he remembered that in 2000 it was \$11.26 an hour there has been a good effort to improve wages over this time.

Member Everett suggested some considerations regarding the layout of the PowerPoint presentation, and Bureau Chief Langenegger agreed to use that information to improve the current presentation.

Member Garcia asked why we have a significant dip in funds in the years 2022. Bureau Chief Langenegger provided that due to the pandemic, we had a hiring freeze and people did not want to come back to work. We were also closed for business. So, we had no revenue coming in and had to reduce spending accordingly.

Vice-Chair Polich suggested we change the layout of the funding graph and present a more understandable format on presenting the details regarding annual personnel budgets. Member Garcia and Member Everett also made some suggestions. The Board had some debate and discussion on what the best way would be to get this message across in public meetings.

Chair Connealy invited a motion for a brief lunch break. Member Wiegel made a motion and Member Everett seconded the motion. All members supported the motion at 1:55 p.m.

6. President's Report and Committee Reports

Chair Connealy called the meeting back to order at 2:32 p.m. to reconvene. For the record, it is noted that Member Paris and Member Killen had to leave and were not in attendance for the remainder of the meeting.

a. Parks Advisory Board Member Recruitment

Chair Connealy did speak to Matthew Martinez regarding his interest in being appointed to the Board. It was discussed that Mr. Martinez did have some follow up discussion and Chair Connealy will follow up with him again. The Board has one position as well that needs to be filled and Administrative Services Bureau Chief Miche Garica did speak to someone who is interested.

b. Committee Reports

Chair Connealy wanted to commend Peter Lipscomb for his great job hosting the last Board meeting. Since the last Board meeting Chair Connealy went back to Cerrillos Hills State Park for their annual tarantula spider hike. Park Manager Lipscomb led about 75 people on the hike, and she had a great time at the event. Chair Connealy did submit a letter to the Attorney General and Secretary's Offices about modernizing Board meetings through the allowance of virtual participation to establish a quorum; Chair Connealy will follow up on this outreach. Chair Connealy also recognized the Kids in Parks program was no in place and taking applications.

- i) **Climate Change:** Vice-Chair Polich noted that she and Member Killen met with Division Planner Joseph Flemming regarding getting Climate Change displays into all State Parks. Mr. Flemming is moving forward with the steps that need to be taken for the proposal. Vice-Chair Polich is hoping these displays will be completed over the next year.
- ii) **Outdoor Classrooms:** The Board appreciated an update given on the Kids in Parks transportation grants being open for applications.
- iii) **Law Enforcement:** No report.
- iv) **Public/Private Partnerships:** No report.

7. Closing Discussion

- a. **New Business:** Some suggestions came up on what would be the best approach to bring new business topics up for discussion.
- b. **Next Meeting Date:** March 6th at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park

8. Public Comment

This Board meeting had no public participation.

9. Adjournment:

Chair Connealy invited a motion to adjourn the meeting. Member Garcia motioned and Vice Chair Polich seconded the motion. All Board members voted in approval and the Board meeting was adjourned at 2:56 p.m.

Approved:

Chair Selena Connealy

Date:
