

State of New Mexico
Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department

Michelle Lujan Grisham
Governor

Sarah Cottrell Propst
Cabinet Secretary

Todd E. Leahy, JD, PhD
Deputy Cabinet Secretary

Toby Velasquez, Director
State Parks Division



New Mexico State Parks Advisory Board Meeting

Tuesday, June 20, 2023 @ 11:00 AM

**Rio Grande Nature Center State Park,
2901 Candelaria Rd. NW; Albuquerque, NM 87107 and via Webex**

1. Call to Order

Chair Connealy called the Parks Advisory Board (Board) meeting to order at 11:06 a.m. and provided a welcome to the new Board members.

2. Roll Call

Director Toby Velasquez called roll.

a. Board Members Present:

- ✓ Selena Connealy, Chair
- ✓ Judith Polich, Vice Chair
- ✓ Pat Walsh, Member
- ✓ Stephanie Bestelmeyer, Member
- ✓ Rodney Paris, Member
- ✓ CJ Wiegel, Member
- ✓ Thomas Garcia, Member
- ✓ Eileen Everett, Member

b. Board Member Absent:

- ✓ Patrick Killen, Member

3. Approval of Agenda

Chair Connealy moved to approve the agenda as drafted. There was a motion and second, the recording did not sufficiently capture the audio of which members made these actions. All Board members voted in favor of approving the agenda as drafted.

4. Approval of Minutes

Member Polich stated that in that last meeting there was a discussion about combining Board committees. Director Velasquez stated that he didn't identify that in his review of the recording of the last meeting and Chari Connealy stated that this topic could be discussed later in today's agenda.

Director Velasquez discussed and asked for feedback regarding the format of the draft minutes of the last Board meeting. He provided that the length of minutes were so minutes won't be verbatim but were still effective in capturing the spirit of the meeting discussions. Director Velasquez received positive feedback from the Board regarding the meeting minutes format. Director Velasquez recommended approval of the meeting minutes as drafted. Chair Connealy requested a motion to approve the minutes, Member Everett made a motion to approve, and Member Walsh seconded the motion. Member Garcia abstained from the vote due to not taking part in the previous meeting. All other Board members voted in approval of the meeting minutes as drafted.

5. Introductions

- a. New Board Members:
 - i. Rodney Paris
 - ii. CJ Wiegel
 - iii. Thomas Garcia
 - iv. Pat Walsh
- b. Standing Board Members:
 - i. Vice Chair, Judith Polich
 - ii. Stephanie Bestelmeyer
 - iii. Member, Elieen Everett
 - iv. Chair, Selena Connealy

6. Director's Report

a. **Agency Overview**

Director Toby Velasquez and Bureau Chief Miche Garcias introduced themselves and provided a summary of their background with the agency.

Director Toby Velasquez went over several topics pertaining to State Parks and the uniqueness that all State Parks have to offer in their own unique way. Touching base with every aspect of what it takes to run our beautiful State Parks and discussed that only 1/3 of the thirty five state parks that occur in 25 of 33 counties across the state are owned by the State of New Mexico.

Director Velasquez emphasized that the agency has many partnerships with entities like acequia associations, Storrie Lake Water Users Association, Game and Fish, the State Land Office, and several federal agencies as well.

Director Velasquez provided that State Parks are the primary contributor for formative outdoor experiences for kids, families, and new generations to come and be in our State Parks every day. State Parks are a constant work in progress and there are a lot of different moving parts.

Director Velasquez discussed that one of the agencies' primary focuses is to bring in more staff to continue to provide what is needed in order to run State Parks. He stated that they truly rely on our staff which is comprised of 190 full-time employees and 136 seasonal employees to support 41 decentralized locations across the system.

Director Velasquez also discussed the new Horizons Building in Albuquerque that is being used by the Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department and State Parks Division as a staff office location. Director Velasquez also shared that last year FY22 State Parks served 5.2 million visitors.

Director Velasquez provided a brief update on the Land and Water Conservation Program related to administrative staff support of programs and agency transitions and turnover. Member Polich asked if there will be LWCF funds appropriated for wetland acquisition per recent Supreme Court guidance. Director Velasquez discussed that LWCF funds could be used for wetland acquisition and subsequent protection, however, sub-grant recipients would have to develop and seek out LWCF project funding for that. Director Velasquez provided information on LWCF grant applicants for the 2021 cycle.

b. Personnel Vacancy Update

Director Velasquez confirmed that the agency has a multitude of positions posted for advertising and recruitment. He stated that the agency has a few positions in the process of hiring and hopes to have them filled soon. If this group of positions get filled the agency would be at a 16% vacancy rate which has not been seen for many years. Director Velasquez expressed that the vacancy rate goal is to be at or below 10% for fiscal year 2024, and the vacancy rate goal for fiscal year 2025 is 7% . Director Velasquez stated that the agency was at a 28% vacancy rate this year they have significantly reduced that rate. Director Velasquez asked the Board to help recruit through their respective local and regional networks because there are many employment opportunities with States Parks.

Director Velasquez discussed a request he has made to repurpose 45 FTE positions used to support 136 seasonal hires to now support 35 full time equivalent positions for the agency. This action would re-create essential positions that were lost under the last administration such as the Outdoor Education Coordinator and reestablish the statewide outdoor education bureau.

Vice Chair Polich asked what could be done to shield the agency from the dramatic political impacts in past administrations. Director Velasquez discussed that agency resiliency can be improved by being able to act as an enterprise agency and adjust state park fees, which have not been changed in over 20 years. Director Velasquez also provided that boat registration fees haven't changed since 1984. Director Velasquez also discussed program resiliency for each agency at the department level. Member Wiegel asked about the long period of time that fees have not been changed and Director Velasquez discussed the administrative rule process and lack of interest in raising fees on New Mexicans and visitors to our state.

Member Everett discussed highlighting all the work that is happening in State Parks and within other state agencies. Member Everett also inquired about how the agency vacancy rate compares to other state agencies and if salaries are keeping up. Director Velasquez provided that there are work force challenges with long term commitment beyond a couple of years and that being decentralized across the state in mostly rural communities has been challenging.

Member Walsh discussed concerns with low park fees and competitive salaries for staff. Director Velasquez provided information on efforts by this administration to improve salaries such cost of living, compaction, insurance premium offsets, and performance based annual salary increases. Director Velasquez provided an overview of strategies such as position classifications, salary ranges, and opportunities to pay staff better within the position ranges if funding increases are supported by improved fiscal year operating budgets.

Member Paris discussed his perspective on reconnecting state parks, agency staff, and their work with their communities. Member Paris discussed potential to evaluate policies so that they support this effort for parks to do so in their communities.

Chair Connealy added that having state parks advocates in other agencies such as the Outdoor Recreation Division, Public Education Department, and connecting them with state parks and communities. It was discussed that this could be a Board committee activity. Member Everett discussed the impact of the Kids in Parks Program and the importance of continuing and expanding that program. Member Bestelmeyer added that there are opportunities to know and connect with teachers. Member Bestelmeyer asked for information regarding best point of contact for State Parks for discussion teacher outreach. Director Velasquez confirmed that the agency's point of contact is Dr. Robert Stokes, Bureau Chief, Program Support Bureau.

Director Velasquez then shared Kids in Parks, outdoor education/interpretive measured and reported data from 2021 and 2022. Member Paris discussed bringing parks to kids. Member Walsh discussed the importance of having full time interpretive/education staff dedicated to doing this in their local and regional communities. Member Everett discussed the value, impact, and work of the outdoor education task force and how that

may be reconvened to connect people, agencies, etc. to discuss all the good work that is happening and plan for doing more as a collective. Member Garcia discussed the competition between agencies to further their respective agendas and programs through the years and discussed engaging the 89 school districts to speak on behalf of their interest in outdoor education.

Director Velasquez provided examples of needed agency organizational position needs and changes to include positions within administration, operations, and programming.

Chair Connealy announced that lunch arrived and asked for a motion to take a lunch break. Motion by Member Garcia motioned, and Member Bestelmeyer seconded. All members supported the motion at 12:37 p.m.

Chair Connealy asked for a motion to start the Board meeting after the lunch break. Member Everett made the motion, Member Bestelmeyer seconded, and all Board members supported the action. Chari Connealy started the Board meeting at 1:07 p.m.

c. FY25 Budget Request Highlights

Director Velasquez We will be entering our 2024 fiscal year, at the end of this month. July 1st the budget is already in place for 2024, but we are already working on our next budget request which will go from the division to the department to the executive to the Legislative finance committee as well as executive review from DFA for approval. Our budget request is going to be one of the biggest asks that we have had in a long time. We are asking for capital. ARPA funded 20,000,000, million to our department we have obligated 10 million of already in different areas across the state. so, is a 3-year federal appropriation so by 2025 it will be turned out. Knowing that in 2025 we will need to recover and be able to keep those capital improvements, renovations and new construction funded, through other funding that we get through the Legislative request. We have a 7–10-million-dollar request for statewide restoration efforts and infrastructure projects. We have a 35-position request for additional operational funding for us to meet our vacancy rate of 7% including that additional funding to make sure we can integrate those 35 positions.

Member Polich asked for the amount of the FY25 budget and what percentage increase it is from the prior year. Director Velasquez discussed that the operational budget is \$39 million in FY24 but \$9 million of that is federal funds dedicated to support communities (LWCF). Director Velasquez stated that in evaluation of just operating budget, the increase from FY24to FY 25 will be about \$5 million if approved. Director Velasquez then shared details regarding a couple of federal grant programs the agency engages to leverage state/federal match options and boat access projects.

d. Fees Study Update:

Director Velasquez provided information on the agencies draft Fees Study that started in January 2023. State Parks fees have not changed in over 20 years, boat registration fees haven't changed since 1984. The agency had provided their draft Fees Study to the Office of the Secretary for review, feedback, and support. Director Velasquez described general strategies that are contemplated within the draft and the review was comprehensive. Member Everett asked if any additional information on proposed fees could be provided. Director Velasquez explained that the Consumer Product Index, outer state fees, and federal fees were used to evaluate potential and proposed fee increases. An example provided by Director Velasquez was day-use fees going from \$5 to \$10 per vehicle, eliminating Annual Passes, and resident/noon-resident fees. The Board may have had many different approaches and strategies in this fee study.

Member Polich asked why we are focusing on being a bargain and not trying to have fees for non-residents equal to fees that we pay when we go to other states, and why does that make sense. Director Velasquez discussed that the draft Fees Study has a differentiated fee for non-residents and that LWCF Program stipulations must be considered when considering fee increases to non-residents.

Member Bestelmeyer asked about timeline, collections, and modernization of the system. Director Velasquez provided that the agency continues to move kiosks forward and for use in state parks. Director Velasquez stated that his proposed timeline for fee adjustments to be implemented is January 1, 2024, and that the agency would hold public meetings to inform our state of changes. Member Walsh discussed educating the public in the interim period, Director Velasquez stated he prefers waiting a bit longer to determine what level of support the fees study will have. Member Everett discussed her interest in having a virtual public meeting that makes this 100% accessible, Director Velasquez agreed that this was a great option to add to our planning. Member Everett discussed that state parks have free access for classes and other designated days. Director Velasquez provided details on how state park fees continue to be segmented and waived for certain individuals and groups.

Director Velasquez asked Board members to be ready to support the agency with public meetings when the agency gets to that point in adjusting the agency's fees schedule.

7. President's Report and Committee Reports

a. Parks Advisory Board Member Recruitment

Chair Connealy discussed that the Board can have up to 11 members, and that there are currently 9 members positions filled. It was discussed that our native indigenous communities and western region of the state are not represented on the Board and would be great additions for the last two open Board positions.

Chair Connealy discussed the format of the Board meetings being in person and virtual. The importance of visiting state parks that host a Board meeting was discussed, but it was

noted that due to long driving distances it is a challenge for Board members to attend in person. Director Velasquez stated that the guidance he has received regarding Open Meeting Act compliance is that Board members have to be present to establish a quorum. Chair Connealy stated that a letter has been drafted from the Board to the Attorney General's office raising concerns about Board members not being able to participate virtually. Chari Conneally stated that she would revise the letter and get it out for review by Board members.

b. Committee Reports:

i. Climate Change

Vice Chair Polish discussed the climate change brochure and discussed it with the Board, a copy of the brochure was provided to the Board for review. Member Polich explained that she, Member Walsh, and Member Killen comprise this committee. Member Polich discussed the intent to get climate change displays up in state parks over the next year and welcomed other Board members to join this committee. Member Polich asked if there are funds to support Board member travel as they travel to support this work. Director Velasquez confirmed that Board business can be supported with per diem reimbursement. Member Polich asked about other staff the agency could use to support this project to include graphic design and GIS related work.

Member Walsh discussed the impacts of climate change in state parks resulting in varying water levels, less visitation, fire restrictions, park facilities and comfort stations.

Member Everett discussed the option to use business or postcard sized cards with a QR code that is much less expensive but can still help drive people to the information.

Chair Connealy discussed the new opportunity to have committee meetings now that we have more Board members and less of an issue with engaging a rolling quorum due to the previous Board member count.

Director Velasquez discussed that the agency and park staff, such as Division Planner Joey Fleming can support the interests of the committee to include coordinating working with a contractor for indoor/outdoor signage and displays.

ii. Outdoor Classrooms

Chair Connealy stated this committee has not met but believes that there are many topics for the committee to discuss focused on statewide outdoor education. Director Velasquez stated that Dr. Robert Stokes could be assigned to be the point of contact for this committee.

iii. Law Enforcement

Chair Connealy detailed that due to the departures of former Board members we don't currently have Board members assigned to this committee. Director Velasquez stated that he prefers assigning park staff to support and be the point of contact for each committee and for this committee it would be Bureau Chief Manuel Overby. Division Director Velasquez discussed the importance of this committee and Chair Connealy asked Member Paris if he would be interested in participating with this committee. Member Paris and Member Wiegel confirmed their interest in participating with this committee.

iv. Public/Private Partnerships

It was discussed that Director Velasquez will be the point of contact for this committee and Chair Connealy stated that Member Killen may be interested in combining or adding Friends groups and other related content to this committee. Chair Connealy asked Board members to consider if other committees may be needed.

8. Closing Discussion

a. **New Business**

Director Velasquez provided that he will bring agency staff in meet and work with the Board. Director Velasquez also addressed Board member W9 information to process per diem requests. It was confirmed that all Board members submitted their W9 information. Director Velasquez stated that he would provide Open Meetings Act guidance as soon as he receives it.

b. **Next Meeting Date**

Chair Connealy stated that scheduling this date may be contingent upon the Fees Study release.

9. Public Comment

- a. There was no public participation.

10. Adjournment

- o Chair Connealy requested a motion to adjourn. Vice Chair Polich made a motion to adjourn, it was seconded by Member Garcia. All Board members voted in approval, motion carried, and the Board meeting was adjourned at 3:23 p.m.

1220 South St. Francis Drive • Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505
Phone (505) 476-3355 • Fax (505) 476-3361 • www.nmparks.com

Approved:

Date:


Chair Selena Connealy

9/26/23