



CALIFORNIA
STATE PARKS
FOUNDATION

Testimony to the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee
March 11, 2014

Good Morning, Madam Chair and Members. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I'm Elizabeth Goldstein, President of the California State Parks Foundation.

In the brief time I have with you this morning, I'd like to share some observations about the parks community, thoughts about what the Legislature can be doing for our park system, and hopes for Parks Forward. I would like to begin and end with promise and challenge of the future.

Thoughts for the Future

I agree wholeheartedly with the General's oft mentioned assessment that making parks relevant and connecting Californians to their parks is an essential element of ensuring a future for our parks system. In fact it may be THE most essential element in insuring that future.

The ways Californians use or aspire to use their state parks now is different than the way many parks were designed in the 50s and 60s. In fact, Californians themselves are different and the advent of technology and the many ways that it could aid in enhancing park visits and education is vast, yet untapped for our parks.

Truly connecting Californians to their parks, in order to encourage greater appreciation, stewardship, and support for parks is more important than ever. And it will require a significant, sustained, and extensive public outreach effort. Simply assuming that if we build (or improve, or enhance) it, they will come, is not necessarily true.

Earlier this year, we at the Foundation launched a new public engagement campaign, called "State Parks are Great Places." You'll be seeing more about this campaign when we bring over 100 advocates to the Capitol in May for our annual Park Advocacy Day.

The goal of the campaign has been to highlight unique aspects about our parks as well as to reinforce the personal connection that Californians have to these parks. That's why we've

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chosen themes like “State Parks are Great Places to Tie the Knot” and have received photos and stories from Californians across the state who got engaged or married in state parks.

The State Parks are Great Places campaign is a pilot for what must happen all over the state; and that is to cause citizens to pause and think about the ways they already do or want to engage in state parks for themselves.

CSPF is stretching itself to define the elements of a powerful statewide campaign to encourage people to say to themselves, this state parks system matters to me and I am going to do something about it. It is our belief that the future of state parks depends on our collective ability to achieve that connection.

Parks Community

One of the vital ways that DPR demonstrates its connection to Californians is through its partnerships. As you’ve already discussed today, the last two years have been some of the most challenging in state parks’ history. I’ll note that, in fact, the pressure on our state park system has been virtually constant the last 6 years—since the first round of park closures was proposed in January 2008.

That constant threat was taken seriously by park partners up and down the state who worked to raise funds, rally community support, and ask how they could do more for their parks. And then came the “hidden funds” in 2012. .

Things are better today than they were a year ago. Parks have stayed open, and that has been fundamental to improving relationships with park partners. DPR’s diligence insuring that the \$10M in match funding is committed to partners has been a welcome sign of respect and appreciation to the partner community.

In the last 19 months, the five parks under management by nonprofit organizations have all seen increased visitors and increased revenues. This is a testament to the potential of this new model of park management.

In addition, several of the parks under donor agreements have been able to expand hours modestly or embark on much-needed improvement projects because of donor funds coupled with state matching funds.

The old maxim, “out of crisis comes opportunity” is, indeed, true, but it is also true that the crisis in our state parks has made successful partnerships challenging. Productive partnerships can come about in times of crisis, but they shouldn’t be defined by a crisis mentality. Each partner must feel that it comes to the party willingly.

One of the lessons we have all learned is that it’s possible to be successful without being a good partner. And it’s possible to be a good partner but not be successful. Good ***and*** successful must be the gold standard we are all seeking.

That is why we launched our Technical Assistance Center in 2012, to help build the capacity and expertise of non-profit partners to the state, so non-profits bring even greater value to the table when partnering with DPR.

Our ongoing commitment to improving partnerships is also why we will be working with the State Park & Recreation Commission, DPR, the Parks Forward Commission, and partners statewide over the next few months to help define the ranges of partnerships likely for our state parks, and develop tools to assess partnership potential.

Legislature's Role

The oversight the Legislature has been exercising the last few years has been essential. Its willingness to enable new models of park management (a la AB 42), to push for committing “found” funds to match private donations, and to create the new independent, oversight body that is Parks Forward have all be essential, positive steps.

Another positive step would be to fund in this year’s Governor’s Budget proposal- \$40 million for deferred maintenance needs and authority for DPR to spend \$14 million of revenues it earns this year. I urge the Legislature to adopt the Governor’s budget in those areas.

The Legislature’s interest in potential new bond funding to address aging park infrastructure, potentially through funding in a water bond, as well as a future park bond are also encouraging signs. We look forward to continuing to work with the Legislature to ensure that statewide bonds include resources for the parks of the future.

One of the best things the Legislature can do is support DPR in defining and achieving a laser-like focus on its areas of core competency. In our view, those core competencies are in protecting the natural, cultural and historic resources in our parks, and in interpreting and teaching about those resources’ significance.

We share with the Legislature the expectation that there is untapped potential for generating revenues in the state parks system. But whether intentional or unintentional, the emphasis on revenue has sometimes been translated into an expectation for financial self-sufficiency – a concept that is frankly unrealistic, as no state park system in the country exists without substantial public subsidy, i.e. General Fund sources.

DPR has done an admirable job over the last year and a half ramping up to build, execute, and maintain a business enterprise program. General Jackson’s creation of a new Marketing Division is an important addition to DPR bench.

But this is an area where looking outside the Department for expertise and leadership would not only be appropriate, it would be prudent. To truly maximize revenues in the most mission-appropriate, yet effective way, there needs to be better and comprehensive data about its customers, market assessments of its competitive advantages in key markets, thorough return on investment projections, validated cost of service figures, and more.

I believe that DPR having the bandwidth and resources to focus on achieving excellence in its core competencies is key; in fact the most important function it has. So it is time to look outside the Department for help and guidance to lift revenue generating potential.

Parks Forward

Tackling the hard questions and creating a master plan for specific, actionable changes in our park system is the charge of the Parks Forward Commission. Like the General, we are pleased at the scope of interest and diversity of expertise that Commission members are applying to the task – it is absolutely what we had envisioned when we established the idea of a multi-disciplinary, stakeholders advisory body back in Assembly Bill 1589.

There are a lot of hopes riding on the shoulders of the Parks Forward process. We all need a fresh perspective to bring us back to the goal of excellence, even if that means thinking about new, different, and transformative changes in how our parks system is managed, promoted, funded, and supported. We look forward to what we believe will be a bold agenda and challenge for us all.

Our parks are magnificent, ethereal places, and they are also the backdrop to many parts of Californians' lives. As we join DPR and partners around the state in celebrating the 150th anniversary this year, we are even more committed to making sure state parks stay relevant as we work to ensure they are available, accessible, and enjoyable for visitors now and into the future.