

Parks Forward Staff Note: This summary was created by professional consultants Kearns & West based upon four focus groups with Department staff conducted in May and June of 2014. The intent of the focus groups was to better engage staff with the Parks Forward process and solicit feedback on the April 23 staff working draft. This feedback is helping to inform the next iteration of the Parks Forward Commission's plan, along with input from the public (including through the May/June 2014 public workshops), Park partners, and other stakeholders.

Executive Summary

Summary Findings from Parks Forward Initiative May/June 2014 California State Parks Focus Group Sessions

This document summarizes findings from four focus group sessions conducted with California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) staff in May and June 2014. The focus groups were convened by the Parks Forward Initiative (PFI). The primary purpose of these focus groups was to receive feedback on draft recommendations in the [April 23, 2014 Staff Working Draft Report](#) being considered by the Parks Forward Commission.

Focus group participants were broadly supportive of the topic areas covered in the report, although staff views differed on some of the proposed recommendations. There were only a few recommendations over which participants showed significant concern. The following highlights overarching themes that emerged across the four focus groups:

- **Acknowledge and Build on Existing State Parks Efforts.** Participants across the focus groups suggested that future versions of the report do a better job situating the recommendations within the context of what the Department is already doing (and in some cases doing well). Several expressed the view that the Department could effectively address many of the challenges highlighted in the report if only it had more funding and staff resources.
- **Appropriate Role of Partnerships.** Participants across all of the focus groups recognized the critical role that partners play in the functioning of State Parks. However, many were concerned that the report treated partnerships as a solution to all of State Parks' problems. They wanted a more nuanced treatment in the report that acknowledges that some existing partnerships are not as helpful as they could or should be. In general, they felt that the focus should be on using partnerships selectively and strategically to address appropriate needs. Many participants supported the idea of conducting an assessment of existing partnerships and analyzing what is working and not working.
- **Effective Department.** Across all focus groups, the "Build an Effective Department of Parks and Recreation" section generated the most interest. Several participants recommended that the title be changed to "Build a *More* Effective Department" to reflect the work already taking place. Many felt that it did not make sense to address the other recommendations in the report until the Department first "got its own house in order." Feedback on specific recommendations included:
 - There was broad support for "aligning and modernizing technology and accounting systems," although participants highlighted different ways to go about doing this.
 - Participants were mixed on the topic of peace officer versus non-peace officer leadership. Many felt that the report's framing of this sensitive issue was overly divisive and recommended putting it in terms of "hiring the most qualified person for the position."
 - Participants were cautious about (and in some cases resistant to) the recommendation to establish an "internal efficiency office". They were concerned that this office, especially if composed of external consultants, would not be able to successfully anticipate the many road blocks to implementation that would certainly arise. There were also concerns that staff would not sufficiently "buy in" to the concept, which would be a major roadblock in itself. Senior staff in particular was strongly in favor of having an internal-only "transition team" lead this effort.

Many participants were concerned about the implementability of several of the recommendations under this topic because they would require institutional or even statutory changes. There was strong support for including an additional recommendation that addresses the identified need for improved internal communications (e.g., between headquarters and the field). Many viewed improved internal communications as critical to the success of the Parks Forward Initiative.

- **Mixed Views on the New Support Entity.** Many participants were open to the recommendation of creating a New Support Entity, generally liked the idea of State Parks having a close partner and ally, and saw a distinct role for the new entity. This partner could work effectively, appropriately, and in an aligned manner with the Department to help State Parks better achieve its mission. Other commenters, however, questioned whether a New Support Entity was needed at all. Some felt that State Parks, with sufficient funding, is the most appropriate entity for addressing the needs identified in the *Staff Working Draft Report*. Others questioned whether the roles identified for the New Support Entity were duplicative with existing partners; several suggested that the State Parks Foundation could adequately fill many of these roles.
- **Lack of Clarity and Detail.** Many participants felt that the draft report would benefit from additional clarity around key terms. Some of the terms mentioned for clarification include “partnerships,” “health,” and “promote.” Other participants were concerned that the current draft lacked sufficient detail on exactly how the recommendations would be implemented.
- **No One-Size-Fits-All Solutions.** A recurrent theme across the focus groups was that different parks have different challenges. There will likely be few one-size-fits-all solutions.
- **More Analysis Needed to Inform Recommendations.** Many participants noted that while a number of recommendations include the word “increase” or “expand,” there is little quantifiable data in the report. Most felt that determining a clear baseline would ensure a common understanding of how *much* of an increase would be needed to achieve success.
- **Adequate Staffing and Funding Are Key to Implementation.** Many participants noted the Department’s current inability to implement recommendations without increased staff and funding.