



Contact: Steven Maviglio
916-607-8340
ParksForward@gmail.com

Parks Forward Commission Report Calls for “Fundamental Transformation” of California State Parks

Independent panel recommends major changes to modernize, engage partners, and expand access

SACRAMENTO, January 30, 2015 – Calling for a “fundamental transformation” of the state’s 1.6 million acre park system, the Parks Forward Commission today issued its final plan that recommends a series of sweeping changes to ensure the long-term sustainability of California's state parks.

The Commission, an independent panel of leaders across the state charged by the Governor and Legislature to review the future of the state’s 279-unit park system, lays out a vision for the future of state parks for 2025 along with a two-year action plan, and details dozens of specific recommendations to modernize, engage partners, and expand access to the state’s park system. Key recommendations in the 56-page report, available at <http://www.ParksForward.com>, focus on:

- Creating a transformation team, housed in the Parks Department and staffed by experienced internal and external staff, to transform the Department’s organizational structure and update its outdated systems, processes, tools, and technology;
- Opening pathways to leadership for the most qualified employees, and recruiting and training a new generation of park professionals that reflect California’s racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity;
- Creating a statewide nonprofit strategic partner, tentatively dubbed “Parks California,” that will bring resources not currently available to undertake key projects and programs in coordination with the Department;
- Prioritizing necessary support to protect the system’s natural and cultural resources for future generations;
- Expanding park access for California’s underserved communities and urban populations and engaging California’s younger generations; and
- Establishing a reliable, dedicated funding structure for California parks, including a more entrepreneurial revenue-generating strategy.

The Commission's report challenges the California State Park System to reform and enhance management and operations and once again become "a shining star of California innovation."

"Our plan is ambitious, it is also achievable," says Parks Forward Commission Co-chair and former state senator, Christine Kehoe. "It is a blueprint for transforming how state parks are run, how they protect the state's natural and cultural resources, and how they will serve all Californians and attract other visitors. It's not designed to dwell upon past problems, but to turn the page to a bright future through fundamental change."

"Change at this level isn't easy; it would have been much easier for us simply to call for more funding and propose modest incremental change," says Parks Forward Commission Co-chair Lance Conn, a Bay Area businessman and conservationist. "However, those fixes will not realize our broader vision for California parks, and may just perpetuate problems that could eventually cause irrevocable damage. Our treasured parks, Californians, and dedicated park staff deserve better."

"There is an urgent need to transform our parks so they are accessible to all Californians, engage younger generations, and promote the healthy lifestyles and communities that are uniquely Californian," said Natural Resources Agency Secretary John Laird. "There is no reason that California's state parks cannot be a model for our nation and the world. This bold report sets us on the path to make that happen."

"The Parks Forward effort has resulted in our Department taking a robust look at our practices and resources, and we have the unique opportunity to develop and implement strategies that will strengthen our park system," said Lisa Mangat, Acting Director, California State Parks. "The report is not the end of a process, but the beginning of a shared vision to bring positive initiatives, many of which are already underway, including the Transformation Team, increased use of technology and outreach to youth and underserved. There is a lot of momentum for positive and sustainable change, and broad-based support that will be critical in the months and years to come. With improvements in internal budgetary processes and the announcement of a transformation team in January, we already are committed to ensuring the Commission's recommendations are turned into action."

In addition to its major structural reforms, the Commission also is calling for greater accessibility and enhanced visitor experiences through development of alternative lodging (such as newly designed cabins) and digital discovery tools (such as new smart phone apps for finding parks and online photo-maps of trails via a partnership with Google). <http://www.parks.ca.gov/NewsRelease/434>.

The plan is being published after nearly two years of outreach and study that included public meetings, discussions with State Parks leadership and staff, surveys, social media interaction, and independent analyses conducted for the Commission. It is slated to be adopted at a public meeting of the Commission on February 6, 2015, at the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento.

The Commission's plan is the result of the California State Parks Stewardship Act and AB 1478, signed into law by Governor Brown in 2012. In June 2013, the California Natural Resources Agency, California Department of Parks and Recreation, and Resources Legacy Fund, on behalf of philanthropic organizations, entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to create the Parks Forward Initiative.

Secretary of Natural Resources John Laird appointed the independent Parks Forward Commission to undertake an evaluation of state parks and develop recommendations for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the State Park System to meet the needs of all Californians and park visitors. The 12-member Commission reflects broad expertise in business, nonprofit, education, natural resources, and public service.

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