

Parks Forward Staff Note: This document summarizes the last of three formal focus group engagements of Department staff before the Parks Forward Commission finalizes its recommendations in November 2014. This summary, prepared by professional consultants Kearns & West, is a reflection of nearly 40 senior staff members' individual comments on August 7, 2014. As such, it does not necessarily reflect the position of the Department as a whole.

Memorandum

Date: September 11, 2014

To: Ken Wiseman, Parks Forward Initiative

From: Eric Poncelet and Ben Gettleman, Kearns & West

Re: Parks Forward Initiative – Summary of August 7, 2014 California State Parks Senior Staff Focus Group Meeting

This Memorandum presents our summary findings from the August 7th focus group meeting conducted with California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) senior staff. This was the third focus group meeting with senior staff; the other meetings took place in August 2013 and June 2014. The primary purpose of this meeting was to solicit input on draft recommendations in the [July 30, 2014 Parks Forward Commission Draft](#) plan. The focus group also served to better engage State Parks staff in the Parks Forward Initiative process.

During the focus group meeting, participants were invited to provide input on the following recommendation topics:

- Paths to Field Leadership
- Parks Conservancy
- Transformation Team
- Implementation Table
- Other elements of the *July 30, 2014 Parks Forward Commission Draft*

For each of the above topics, Parks Forward Initiative staff invited focus group participants to help identify keys to ensuring the success of the recommendations in the *July 30, 2014 Parks Forward Commission Draft*.

This document represents a synthesis of the comments heard at the August 7th meeting and summarizes the major themes that emerged. Approximately 40 State Parks senior staff members participated in the focus group meeting, including the Acting Director, Deputy Directors, Policy Chiefs, and District Superintendents.

This document is organized into the following sections:

- **Section I** presents the overarching findings from the focus group.
- **Section II** summarizes the input received, organized by the different recommendation topics.
- **Appendix A** includes the focus group meeting agenda.

I. Overarching and Cross-Cutting Findings

During the August 7th focus group meeting, State Parks senior staff shared a variety of views and comments on the recommendations contained in the *July 30, 2014 Parks Forward Commission Draft* plan. Focus group participants generally found the July 30th Draft to be an improvement over the *April 23, 2014 Staff Working Draft* in terms of structure and clarity. They were generally supportive of the recommendations included in the plan, although they felt it lacked sufficient detail, rationale, and focus on implementation in certain areas. Acting Director Lisa Mangat joined the session as an active participant, providing staff with leadership insight on both the draft and the Parks Forward process. In general, the tone of the session was collaborative, with the shared goal of creating effective and implementable recommendations.

The following highlights overarching, broadly shared, and cross-cutting themes that emerged from the focus group discussion of the various components of the July 30th Draft.

- **Successful implementation requires commitment of resources and funding.** Recommended changes to the Department need to be fully funded and resourced. This includes funding State Parks staff to implement required changes. Participants noted that current staffing levels are insufficient to implement change.
- **Pay close attention to the specific text of the plan.** Exact wording in the plan is very important, as this will be a long-term planning guide that needs to stand the test of time. Participants added that steps should be taken to ensure that statements in the plan will not be taken out of context.
- **More cost information is needed.** The Parks Forward Initiative effort needs to be informed by good information about the cost of running the California State Parks system; the transformation team could help collect this information. Additionally, for the Implementation Table in Appendix C to be useful, the draft plan should include cost information for the individual action items.
- **Clarity around role of State Parks.** While the July 30th Draft does a good job of showing the linkages and relationships between State Parks and other local, regional, and federal park systems, the document would benefit from added clarity around how State Parks is different and the unique role that State Parks should play.
- **Build appropriately on past State Parks decisions and policies.** Key decisions were made in the past regarding many of the proposed recommendations in the plan. Current recommendations should build off of past work, accomplishments, and lessons learned.
- **Change will take time and commitment.** Many of the proposed recommendations address complex issues and will take time and sustained commitment by Department staff to resolve. Participants recommended a strategy consisting of both short-term and long-term fixes.
- **Appropriate role of partnerships.** Partnerships are important and should be structured to support the mission of State Parks. State Parks and its partners – including the anticipated Parks Conservancy – need to establish systems of accountability.

II. Senior Staff Input by Recommendation Topic Area

What follows is a summary of participant input received at the focus group meeting, organized by recommendation topic area and subtopic. Parks Forward Initiative staff requested that senior staff provide input to help deepen the Commission's understanding of what needs to be done to successfully implement the proposed recommendations; as a result, many of the comments received from senior staff were framed as "keys to success."

A. Paths to Field Leadership

Focus group participants broadly supported the Parks Forward Commission's recommendation to broaden field leadership opportunities to those without peace officer certification. Specific comments included:

Diversification of Leadership

- The issue of diversifying the leadership at State Parks is complex, and change will take time. This will require consistent commitment from individual managers and management to make it happen.
 - Some participants suggested including this commitment to diversification in the job descriptions of management.
- Current recommendations should consider key decisions and policies made in the past regarding leadership opportunities. This includes building on current processes viewed as successful, such as training for peace officers and the current rigorous selection process.
- The pool of qualified applicants for leadership positions should be broadened; the Department also needs to give existing staff a "recipe for success" through good training and mentorship. This should start well before staff enter the management level.
- Centralization of key technical staff in service centers may impede field management opportunities. The transformation team should investigate the efficacy of having technical staff manage people and projects out in the field.
- State Parks should populate the field with leaders and staff with a diverse set of backgrounds and skills.
- KSAs (Knowledge, Skills, Ability), which currently determine staff eligibility for positions in the hiring process, should continue to be incorporated into the process.
- The California Department of Corrections has a process for creating leadership diversity that could serve as a good model.
- State Parks needs to create incentives (e.g., better pay) for talented staff to advance. The Department should also encourage employees to pursue career advancement themselves.
- The promotion process should be more consistent.

Training and Skills Development

- Leadership training should focus on the complete set of skills needed for State Parks staff to be effective, including problem solving, customer service, emotional intelligence, working in diverse groups, and conflict resolution. The current Ranger Academy already provides effective training in a number of these areas (e.g., problem solving, hostile conflict resolution).

- The opportunity to receive leadership training should be expanded to non-peace officer staff to enable them to lead effectively.
- Managers need ongoing training; the department should consider the development of a new “management academy.”
- State Parks needs to reestablish its deep commitment to training and provide relevant experiences for staff to grow.
 - Specific recommendations included offering more internal conferences to promote networking and agency-wide conversations, and offering training below the sector level so that staff can move up the ranks.

Hiring and Personnel

- The Department makes a considerable investment in its current staff, and needs to proceed with caution when vetting and hiring candidates from outside the Department, including background checks.
- Internal hiring processes are not always consistent or clear. There should be better internal and external understanding around roles and responsibilities associated with the Superintendent position.
- The development of a “park manager” series would create a pathway for advancement across all classifications.
- On-line hiring exams should be considered; they would allow the Department to vet more candidates.

B. Parks Conservancy

Focus group participants broadly supported the creation of a high-level external support structure to help State Parks better achieve its mission. There was strong agreement that this new entity should be independent of, and not duplicate, the existing State Parks Foundation. Specific comments included:

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

- It is important to clearly identify roles, processes, and expectations regarding how the Parks Conservancy will interact with the Department.
- The Parks Forward Commission’s plan should better articulate that the Parks Conservancy will serve in a supporting role to the Department. According to staff, the relationship should not be structured as a completely equal partnership. For example, the Department, as the public trustee, should identify priorities.
- It would be helpful and appropriate for the Parks Conservancy to serve as a fiscal agent, allowing it to raise funds from external sources on behalf of the Department. The Conservancy could also help add flexibility to the State hiring process.
- The Department and the Parks Conservancy should work in concert to improve communications and marketing, including development of web and mobile device applications.

Communication and Accountability

- Clear communication and ongoing evaluation are necessary components of a successful partnership between the Department and a new Parks Conservancy.
- Establishing accountability will be critical. Without this accountability, the Parks Conservancy’s goals may become self-serving over time, and less directed to supporting the Department. Staff would feel assured by the establishment of a clear framework for

how funds are spent, or by including a State Parks representative on the Conservancy's board.

- The partnership with the Parks Conservancy should include a sunset clause. If the partnership ends, all funds should stay with the Department.
- The relationship will require shared goals and mutual respect.

Relationships with Other Key Partners

- The Department should open its doors to partners and not try to “do it all” on its own. State Parks also needs to improve its ability to negotiate deals with potential partners to ensure it is receiving fair compensation.
- The State Parks Foundation currently has assets and dedicated funds that can and should be leveraged. The Department needs to better understand what those assets are.

C. Transformation Team

Focus group participants recognized the need for a transformation team and emphasized that its success would be linked to several key factors. Specific comments included:

Funding and Cost Implications

- It is critical to have current State Parks staff serve on the transformation team, without the double-burden of their normal work responsibilities (i.e., these staff members should be dedicated members of the team). Pulling staff from their current jobs creates the need to backfill existing positions, an added financial and HR burden for the Department. The Parks Forward Commission should be careful not to under-staff or under-fund the transformation team.
- The transformation team itself should avoid creating unfunded mandates. Department staff will require additional resources to implement the transformation team's recommendations.
- The transformation team should identify costs associated with implementing tasks listed in the plan's Implementation Table, and also help clarify how those tasks relate to other Department priorities.

Authority of Transformation Team

- The transformation team needs the authority (e.g., from the Governor's office) and the ability to remove barriers, including those stemming from outside agencies.

Composition of Transformation Team

- The transformation team needs to be composed of members who understand State Parks' mission (e.g., its focus on protecting natural and cultural resources) and how it works as an organization.

D. Implementation Table

Focus group participants shared a variety of comments on how to improve the current Implementation Table (Appendix C of the plan). Key comments included:

General Comments

- The Parks Forward Commission should prioritize the actions recommended in the Implementation Table.
- Many of the timelines in the Implementation Table seem short and/or unrealistic. Organizational change can take a long time.
- The Implementation Table needs to better define costs associated with implementing recommended actions. The Transformation Team could help determine these future costs.
- The Implementing Parties column of the Table is not consistent. In particular, a more explicit description of “Team” is needed; who will actually be doing the work?

Comments on Specific Content in the Implementation Table

- Creating a lead scientist position (page 27) seems like too detailed a recommendation for this level of plan. Some staff questioned whether this was even a viable recommendation.
- State Parks already has existing partnerships with resource partners, and these should be better leveraged (page 27).
- Regarding the recommendation “take affirmative action to prioritize urban parks as key component of Department’s mission” (page 29): it should be clarified that prioritizing urban parks is not part of a new mission for the Department, but rather a step toward achieving the existing State Parks mission.
- The example of “water conservation bonds” (page 29) is not the best example of public funding.
- The section on overnight accommodations should include options beyond rustic cabins (page 31).
- The recommendation of “establishing basic service and staffing” (page 35) needs more attention and detail.
- Regarding “park unit costs” (page 35): parks are often managed as “operational units” made up of several individual park units. These “operational units” share personnel, equipment, supplies and funding. The recommendations for budgeting should take into consideration how the Department actually operates and manages parks.

E. Additional Comments on the July 30, 2014 Parks Forward Commission Draft

In addition to the four topic areas listed above, focus group participants were invited to provide comments on other sections of the *July 30, 2014 Parks Forward Commission Draft* plan. A summary of their general comments, as well as comments on specific sections of the plan, are provided below.

General Comments

- Public support is critical for change; the public will likely want to provide further input before the draft becomes final.
- The plan should emphasize communication as key to a successful process. The Parks Forward Initiative should keep stakeholders informed throughout implementation to build support.
- State Parks needs to remain relevant for Californians and visitors; the plan should better outline how that will happen.
- The plan should further emphasize both the intrinsic and economic value of parks.

- The plan does not adequately highlight the value of recreation, which is part of the culture of California and the mission of State Parks.
- The Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation and Boating and Waterways divisions are relatively absent from the plan. These divisions have success stories (e.g., financial, climate change programs) to share.
- The plan should better describe what state parks are and how they are different from other parks (local, regional and national) and public lands. It should also better highlight how state parks can play a role in the future of California (e.g., addressing climate change, renewable energy).
- The plan should better define State Parks' role with respect to recreational fields; the Department's current role of providing grants to local parks is appropriate.
- Consider reframing text regarding the Department's inability to identify costs; it currently reads as a failure. State Parks already provided legislatively-mandated costing information and is currently analyzing costs by function, park unit, etc.

Comments on "Expand Access to Parks" Section

- Each park in the State Parks system has a unique carrying capacity and unique uses; growing visitorship is not always beneficial to individual parks.
- The Central Valley is parks poor and also needs improved access to existing parks.
- The last two full paragraphs on page 12 need to be better connected. It should be clarified that the reference to "parks" just after footnote 26 is not specifically referring to state parks but more broadly to park systems statewide. Otherwise, the current phrasing may be misinterpreted as State Parks making a commitment to build soccer fields.
- The phrase "meet the needs of local communities" on the top of page 13 is an overstatement for State Parks and may be misinterpreted. The purview of State Parks is beyond local communities.

Comments on "Engage Younger Generations" Section

- The Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS) program should be an integral part of the section on engaging younger generations.
- The section on engaging youth needs more detail. The approach should focus on removing barriers and getting kids into the parks.

Comments on "Protect Natural and Cultural Resources" Section

- Participants expressed concern about State Parks managing natural resources collaboratively with other partners, as some partners may have different goals or standards. This may increase the risk of managing to the lowest common denominator.

Comments on Next Steps

- Some senior staff requested an audience with members of the Parks Forward Commission to further inform the recommendations.

Appendix A – Senior Staff Focus Group Meeting Agenda



Agenda Parks Forward Initiative DPR Senior Staff – Focus Group Meeting

Thursday, August 7, 2014
10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
4940 Lang Avenue
McClellan, CA 95652

Objectives

- Provide senior staff input to the Parks Forward Commission on the July 30th draft recommendations.

Agenda

Time	Topic	Presenter(s)
10:00 a.m.	Welcome and introductions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of meeting objectives and agenda • Introductions • Ground rules • Clarifying questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ken Wiseman, PFI Executive Director • Lisa Mangat, DPR Acting Director • Facilitator
10:30 a.m.	Brief update on Parks Forward Commission Recommendations (July 30 th draft) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PFI staff • Facilitator
10:45 a.m.	Discuss key elements of July 30 th Parks Forward Commission Recommendations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Paths to Field Leadership</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Discussion questions</u>: What are the keys to successfully opening up the paths to leadership? What might a “transformed” Department look like to fulfill this recommendation? Where might there be resistance within the Department? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All
11:45 a.m.	<i>Break for lunch (provided)</i>	
12:30 p.m.	Discuss key elements of July 30 th Parks Forward Commission Recommendations (continued) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. <i>Parks Conservancy</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Discussion questions</u>: What do we most want the Parks Conservancy to do for the Department, and how do we ensure that we become a good partner? 3. <i>Transformation Team</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Discussion Questions</u>: What are the priority issues/tasks that should be addressed by the transformation team, and how does State Parks staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All

Time	Topic	Presenter(s)
	envision working with this team (e.g., keeping a healthy connection between HQ and the field)?	
2:30 p.m.	<i>Break</i>	
2:45 p.m.	Discuss key elements of July 30 th Parks Forward Commission Recommendations (continued) 4. <i>Implementation matrix</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Discussion questions</u>: Are these the right priority implementation items (actions, people, timing, etc.)? Is there anything missing? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All
3:30 p.m.	Next steps and closing remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role and engagement of State Parks senior staff in the Parks Forward Initiative moving forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ken Wiseman • Lisa Mangat • All
4:00 p.m.	<i>Adjourn</i>	

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