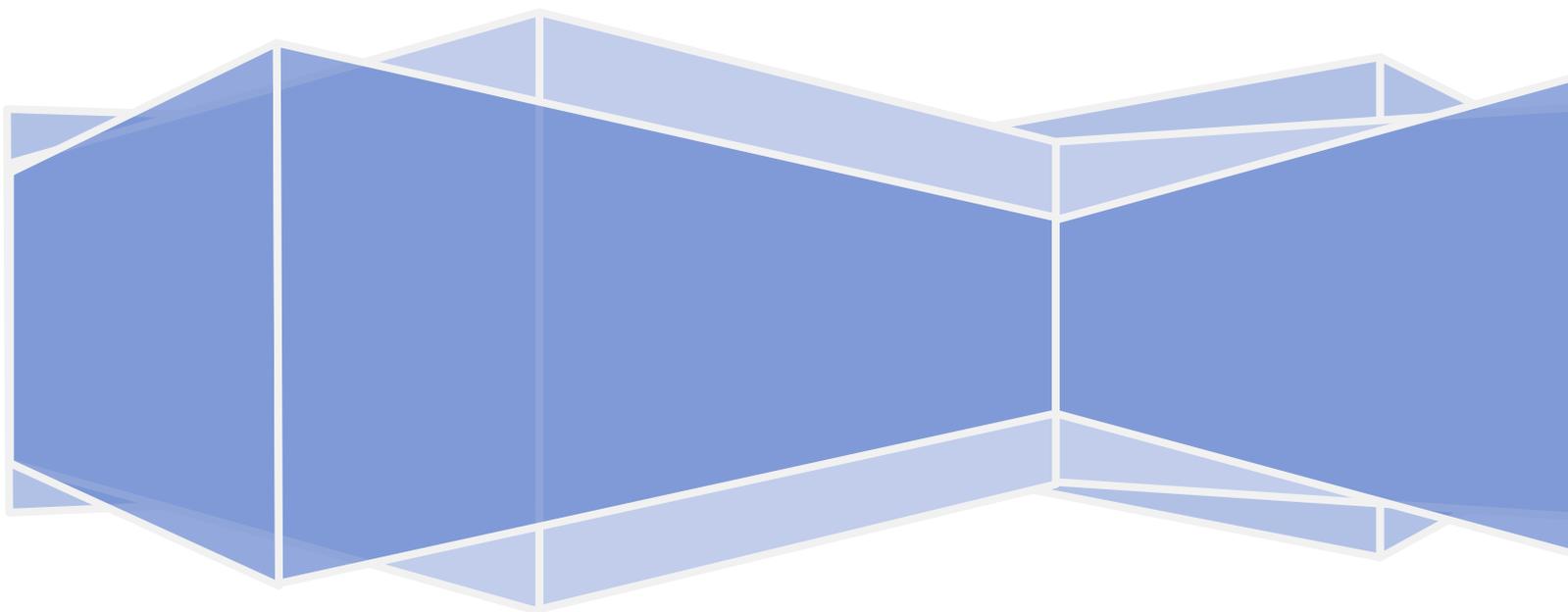




Community Listening Sessions

Executive Summary

Prepared June 2014



INTRODUCTION

Montana State Parks, a Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), is progressing with a strategic planning process to craft an updated vision for the Parks Division and Montana State Parks system for the next 10 years. As part of this, the Division completed a series of community listening sessions around the state in April 2014.

The strategic planning process will ultimately address challenges related to resources and size, and produce effective decisions and an action plan to further the Parks Division mission and to mature the Montana State Parks system. The Parks Division will evaluate where we are, where we want to go, and how we are going to get there.

Objectives

The goals of the community listening sessions were to (1) discuss the challenges of the State Parks system and (2) to learn about the values, needs, and priorities identified by stakeholders for the State Parks system over the next 10 years.

The objectives included:

- Verify issues and challenges the parks system faces
- Learn insights about the stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of Montana State Parks and recreation programs
- Understand which services offered to park visitors and customers are most needed/desired
- Find out views of service provision, recreation programs, partnerships and opportunities, and gauge interest of potential new funding ideas
- Discuss advocacy of park visitors and user groups, and relevancy of parks system for current and future recreationists
- Address how stakeholders generally or specifically think about the future of the Montana State Parks system and recreation programs

Approach

A series of 8 community listening sessions from April 21 to May 2 were conducted across the state with informed stakeholders to elicit opinions, values and perceptions to gain insights and information on the current and future outlook of the State Parks system and recreation programs. A total of 117 people signed in at the meetings. The three hour sessions were sponsored by Montana State Parks and facilitated by the Montana State University Extension's Local Government Center.

Communities hosting a listening session included:

- Glasgow (Cottonwood Inn) – April 21
- Glendive (Dawson Community College) – April 22
- Billings (Pictograph Cave State Park) – April 23
- Kalispell (Lone Pine State Park) – April 28
- Missoula (Travelers' Rest State Park) – April 29
- Whitehall (Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park) – April 30
- Helena (Carroll College) – May 1
- Great Falls (First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park) – May 1

The focus groups included invited individuals who are informed about the Montana State Parks system and programs, and who would be able to engage in informed discussions regarding the future outlook of the state parks system in a strategic manner. The general public was also notified with a press release and open invitation to attend.

The participants varied at each meeting depending on the context and pool of stakeholders, but each meeting generally looked to include a mix of FWP staff, elected officials, city and county representatives, Tribal representatives, park users/user groups, and representatives of various organizations, including tourism, health, education, heritage, and service organizations.

The listening sessions were a mix of two presentations and a series of participant engagement exercises. In total, participants were asked to respond to thirteen questions. Responses were captured using sticky notes, electronic instant response cards, colored index cards and prioritization using sticky dots.

This Executive Summary is intended to highlight the main themes captured through the facilitated process and across eight locations. Specific comments for each location will be highlighted and will either represent that location or express a profound thought warranting additional attention. Full responses are available as an appendix by question and by community.

OVERVIEW

The following questions were asked at each session:

I. Entrance Questions:

- A. What words/attributes come to mind when you see this logo or hear/see the name “Montana State Parks?”
- B. What words/attributes do you think “Montana State Parks” should represent?

II. Clicker Questions:

- C. What is your current view of Montana State Parks?
- D. How do you perceive the current effectiveness of Montana State Parks in interacting with Families and youth?
- E. How do you perceive the current effectiveness of Montana State Parks in engaging local communities?
- F. How do you perceive the current effectiveness of Montana State Parks in supporting state and local economies?

III. Part One Questions:

- G. What, within the State Parks system and recreation programs, is most compelling and valuable to you?
- H. If you were to make recommendations to the State Parks Board and the Legislature, what would you suggest changing about the State Park system?
- I. What experiences/services/ opportunities/programs should we consider enhancing within the State Parks system?

IV. Part Two Questions:

- J. What strategies should the State Parks Board and State Legislature consider pursuing to sustain the State Parks system and increase public investment over the next 10 years? (Please rank and prioritize and then discuss top priorities.)
 - o Develop new revenue streams
 - o Pursue state general fund allocation
 - o Increase park user fees, like camping fees, permitting fees, etc.
 - o Increase vehicle registration fee (currently \$6)

- Pursue more public-private partnerships and private contracts
 - Reduce the size of the State Parks system by selling, transferring, or donating lands that do not meet the mission of the system
 - Establish more state parks, particularly in areas (geographic and/or park type) which are not well served/represented at present
 - Improve current parks with better amenities, like electrical hook-ups, showers, signage etc.
 - Address the backlog of capital maintenance needs
- K. What can you as partners do to support the State Parks system?
- L. What can we at Montana State Parks do to connect with you?

RESPONSE SUMMARY

I. Entrance Questions

The first two questions were “cold questions,” meaning participants were asked to respond to questions as they entered the meeting facility without any context or explanation. The intent was to capture a “person off the street” response about the State Parks system and its logo prior to the presentations and information provided during the session.

A. What words/attributes come to mind when you see this logo or hear/see the name “Montana State Parks”?

Common words and attributes identified include: *natural amenities, open spaces, mountains, rivers, trees, outdoors and wildlife, access/accessibility, recreation, camping, hiking, family and fun, preservation and interpretation of Montana’s heritage and history.*

B. What words/attributes do you think “Montana State Parks” should represent?

Common words and attributes identified include: *opportunity, affordable, accessible, adventure, recreation, historical preservation, interpretation, education and cultural heritage.*



II. Clicker Questions

Using an Instance Response Cards (Clickers), the facilitators generated an immediate response to four polling questions. The chart below shows the participants responses by percentage.

Question	Total N	Positive/ Very Effective	Somewhat Positive/ Effective	Not Effective	Not Sure
C. What is your current view of Montana State Parks?	110	55%	40%	3%	2%
D. How do you perceive the current effectiveness of Montana State Parks in interacting with Families and youth?	108	20%	61%	4%	15%
E. How do you perceive the current effectiveness of Montana State Parks in engaging local communities?	111	8%	41%	31%	20%
F. How do you perceive the current effectiveness of Montana State Parks in supporting state and local economies?	107	20%	58%	15%	7%

III. Part One Questions

Participants responded to three questions by writing their response on index cards. Then participants discussed their answers in small groups. Any new or different ideas generated from the group discussion were added to additional cards.

G. What, within the State Parks system and recreation programs, is most compelling and valuable to you? (Yellow Card)

The main themes captured on the note cards and discussed by the participants include:

- Preservation, protection and education of Montana’s natural resources, history and heritage.
- Access to natural and cultural sites
- Diversity of parks and parks programs
- Recreational trails program/system, recreational activities and opportunities to recreate including mechanized and non-mechanized

H. If you were to make recommendations to the State Parks Board and the Legislature, what would you suggest changing about the State Park system? (Purple Card)

The main themes captured on the note cards and discussed by the participants include:

- Park representation equitably spread throughout the State, particularly along the highline and in NE Montana.
- Funding – additional, adequate, increase, stable, secure. Seek general fund appropriations, increase the \$6 license fee, charge license fee on RV’s, match \$6 fee with general fund appropriation, State Parks bond.
- Improve/enhance park’s infrastructure, amenities/accommodations, fund the backlog of capital projects
- Categorize parks to align with other State Agencies for management (i.e. FWP, DNRC, Heritage Commission, and Historical Society). Decouple from FWP and become State Parks agency. Reduce the number of parks to sustainable level.

- More collaboration with other partners and organizations. Engage university system for research, science, history, etc.
- Engage tourist more effectively. Promote State Parks more effectively (social media, pamphlets, printed guides, radio programs, tell our story, etc.)
- Organize capital campaign; pursue philanthropy; encourage more public/private partnerships; engage existing and organize more “Friends Groups”; host a “friends” summit to align common interests, needs and advocacy efforts
- Develop a MT Waterways program
- Quality educational programs - we value and protect what we understand
- Encourage compliance to regulations through education rather than tickets
- Open State Parks to motorized use



I. What experiences/services/opportunities/programs should we consider enhancing within the State Parks system? (Green Card)

The main themes captured on the note cards and discussed by the participants include:

- Encourage and develop more “Friends Groups.” Engage public through philanthropy – leads to ownership and investment on a local level.
- Partnerships with gateway communities and organizations/groups, youth conservation corps, etc. to enhance parks – value added concessions, trail building, festivals, guided walks
- Staffed Parks Division office in NE MT providing public in Region 6 with “one stop shopping”
- More recreations resources and opportunities – cabins, yurts, campgrounds, restrooms, water, showers, electricity, guided walks, rentals (i.e. bikes, canoes, etc.) more day camps, festivals, campfire talks, trails for XC skiing, mountain biking, and winter activities (ice)
- Passive interpretative sites and better signage
- Zoning within some parks allowing certain activities and development in different zones
- Develop State Park focused marketing including apps for smart phones – use social media to market and interact with park users (interpretive trail apps)
- Enhance ADA accessibility in State Parks
- Partner with schools, communities, and Universities to enhance education programs, day camps, interpretive programs, guided walks, park planning with UM Forestry Dept.



IV. Part Two Questions

For the second part of the session, participants prioritized different funding and management strategies for consideration. The strategies were identified through Board discussions and employee and Legislative feedback received through surveys as part of the strategic planning process.

To prioritize the strategies, participants considered the following question then used sticky dots to prioritize the options presented. Each participant received three sticky dots that they could use to select three out of nine strategies total. After the prioritization exercise participants discussed possible actions related to the prioritized strategies. The

J. What strategies should the State Parks Board and State Legislature consider pursuing to sustain the State Parks system and increase public investment over the next 10 years?

(Prioritized by number of votes)

The top three strategies prioritized by **all locations** are:

1. Develop revenue streams
2. Pursue more public-private partnerships and private contracts
3. Address the backlog of capital maintenance needs

The top strategies **for each location** are:

Glasgow	Glendive	Billings	Kalispell
Establish more state parks	Increase park user fees	Improve current parks with better amenities	Develop new revenue streams
Reduce the size of the State Parks system	Pursue more public-private partnerships	Pursue more public-private partnerships	Address the backlog of capital maintenance needs
Develop new revenue streams		Pursue state general fund allocation	Pursue state general fund allocation
Missoula	Whitehall	Helena	Great Falls
Pursue more public-private partnerships and private contracts	Pursue more public-private partnerships and private contracts	Address the backlog of capital maintenance needs	Develop new revenue streams
Address the backlog of capital maintenance needs	Develop new revenue streams	Develop new revenue streams	Address the backlog of capital maintenance needs
Develop new revenue streams	Pursue state general fund allocation	Pursue more public-private partnerships and private contracts	Increase park user fees, like camping fees, permitting fees, etc.

Each community generated different priorities therefore a variety of ideas for action resulted from this exercise. The main themes captured on the note cards and discussed by the participants include:

- Reduce the number of parks that don't fit the mission and increase the number of parks in NE Montana
- Ideas to increase revenue: increase bed tax amount, state tax refund check-off, oil impact fee/pipeline tax, increase out of state fees, increase license plate fee/make mandatory, charge RV (sell tags), crowd source funding, general fund appropriation and increase philanthropy
- Pursue partnerships, sponsorships and concessionaires
- Review and pursue implementation of NE Park Committee recommendations from 2001-02
- Bypass legislature and go directly to the public with a voter initiative to fund park system
- Encourage, engage, partner with "Friends Groups"

Responses Prioritized by Number of Votes (sticky dots)

Strategies	Glasgow	Glendive	Billings	Kalispell	Missoula	L&C Cavern	Helena	Great Falls	Total	Average
Develop new revenue streams	10	2	6	7	13	8	9	5	60	7.5
Pursue more public-private partnerships and private contracts	7	3	7	2	17	11	7	2	56	7
Address the backlog of capital maintenance needs	2	2	4	4	15	2	10	5	44	5.5
Pursue state general fund allocation	3	0	7	4	9	9	3	2	37	4.6
Reduce the size of the State Parks system by selling, transferring, or donating lands that do not meet the mission of the system	12	1	3	3	7	6	3	1	36	4.5
Increase vehicle registration fee (currently \$6)	1	1	3	2	8	9	4	3	31	3.9
Establish more state parks, particularly in areas (geographic and/or park type) which are not well served/represented at present	15	1	3	2	2	1	4	1	29	3.6
Increase park user fees, like camping fees, permitting fees, etc.	1	4	5	3	4	4	2	5	28	3.5
Improve current parks with better amenities, like electrical hook-ups, showers, signage etc.	1	2	10	0	6	7	2	0	28	3.5

K. What can you as partners do to support the State Parks system? (Blue Card)

General responses include:

- We can help serve as advocates for State Park System, its mission and need for increased funding
- Help solve funding issues
- Volunteer more at Parks.
- Stay involved and engage a “Friends Group”
- Establish effective lines of communication between State Parks and interested citizens, groups, organizations, etc.
- Support proposed legislation intended to address chronic park issues

L. What can we at Montana State Parks do to connect with you? (Salmon Card)

General responses include:

- More equitable distribution of Parks statewide
- Park System can connect more effectively with local museums and cultural institutions
- Keep us in the loop on issues and developments – email newsletter, Twitter, Facebook, blog, etc.
- Establish regional advisory committee to support the Parks Board
- Offer more focus group like this one
- Facilitate a statewide “Friends of MT State Parks” group

