



## **Montana Parks in Focus Draft Recommendations for Public Comment October 2018**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Governor of Montana established the Montana Parks in Focus Commission by Executive Order on January 12, 2018 as a public-private collaboration to strengthen the state park system and to ensure that the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks has the resources, capacity, and expertise to implement the Montana State Parks and Recreation strategic plan.

The purpose of the Montana Parks in Focus Commission is to provide expert, independent recommendations that focus on developing diversified revenue streams, growing strategic partnerships, and building an engaged constituency for state parks.

As the Commission explored the challenges facing state parks, we learned that the parks system faces significant operational, capacity, and financial hurdles at the same time as park visitation continues to grow and demands on the system increase. We also have learned that state parks do not have a coordinated, engaged parks constituency or a robust set of partnerships to bring attention to the critical needs at parks and additional capacity to offer a rich park experience to the 2.6 million visitors at our 55 state parks across the state.

Since January of this year, the Commission has reviewed previous state parks assessments from the last 30 years, held three well-attended public meetings to deliberate and gather public input, conducted internal and external surveys to learn more about how state parks function and public desires for state parks, and examined top performing state parks systems in the region.

As a result of these efforts, the Commission recognizes that a two-fold approach is necessary: a pragmatic, realistic plan for addressing immediate problems as well as a longer-term strategy for future park greatness. Our recommendations are laid out as building blocks, each one necessary for the next, beginning internally and then building externally, ultimately leading to new and more diversified funding streams for parks. The Commission believes that better alignment and support at Fish, Wildlife & Parks along with a compelling vision and demonstrated competence at the Parks Division are critical to longer-term efforts to engage an active constituency and strong partnerships to build and fund the parks system Montanans want and deserve.

## DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

The combined recommendations below seek to accomplish the following goals for State Parks:

- *The Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks is a unified agency, with aligned vision, mission, and programming, and with a fully integrated Parks Division.*
- *The Parks Division has clear strategic priorities, efficient management systems, and sufficient staffing.*
- *Parks has a strong partnership culture that encourages engaged supporters to amplify the case for state parks and active partners to leverage division capacity to improve the state park experience.*
- *Parks has a clear vision and roadmap for success, strong public and legislative support, and a laser focus on increasing and diversifying funding options.*

### I. Accelerate Fish, Wildlife & Parks Transformation Efforts

*Goal: The Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks is a unified agency, with aligned vision, mission, and programming, and with a fully integrated Parks Division.*

Montana state parks cannot thrive until the Parks Division is fully aligned with the larger Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). FWP Director Martha Williams is working to unify the agency, better integrate all divisions, and invest in training senior leaders at FWP to build trust and transform what has been a fragmented department with distinct internal cultures.

#### 1. Embody “One Vision, One Agency” approach

FWP Director Williams has committed to building a unified agency aligned under a common focus and mission. The agency underwent an exhaustive planning process to craft a Vision and Guide setting future direction: “FWP’s work protects the integrity of what defines Montana, the Montana experience and our people.” FWP recently unveiled a new brand, *The Outside Is In Us All*, that builds off this vision. The vision and brand reflect the Agency’s commitment to resource protection *and* unparalleled outdoor recreation experiences. Reconciling these two sometimes competing demands is critical to the success of both the Parks Division and the larger department.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Create an internal FWP transformation team focused on aligning the Vision and Guide, mission, brand, and programming across divisions (include employees of all ranks, divisions, and locations).
- Develop an internal communications strategy and practices to inform employees of the purpose and progress of a “One Vision, One Agency” approach and build support for change.

## **2. Explore alternative management approaches**

Parks cannot succeed without alignment of programs, staffing, and services within FWP. Currently, Parks and FWP regions do not align geographically or functionally. Some divisions within FWP (such as Parks) are centralized while others are not. Roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined, and services are either lacking or duplicative. Creating functional, cross-agency work teams at every level could help build a new, unified culture and team at FWP.

### *Recommendations:*

- Align Parks with FWP regional administrative boundaries. Parks currently has five regions that do not align with the seven FWP regions.
- Undertake a study of FWP's current mix of centralized and decentralized management systems and investigate alternative organizational and management approaches that allow for shared leadership.
- Create a demonstration project for one FWP region with the goal of better program alignment and service delivery efficiency.
- Consolidate the Parks and FWP communications teams. Integrate Parks fully into the FWP website, with consistent content, visibility, data richness, and cross-department links consistent with a common mission and brand.

## **3. Build leaders and provide support for implementing change**

The Parks Division and FWP require leaders who can solve complex problems in a creative, multi-disciplinary fashion. Sustained organizational change requires structural support and change agents at all levels.

### *Recommendations:*

- Secure training and support for leadership, including a transformation team.
- Expand a staff rotation regimen (work detail) framework to build a common mission and culture and provide professional growth opportunities.
- Reward demonstration project staff and share results throughout FWP.
- Update job descriptions and implement performance incentives to reflect new functional/service alignments within FWP.
- Conduct regular staff surveys to create feedback opportunities and register and address staff concerns.

## **II. Strengthen Internal Capability of Parks Division**

*Goal: The Parks Division has clear strategic priorities, efficient management systems, and sufficient staffing.*

Parks staff are dedicated, thoughtful, passionate, and severely constrained by a lack of resources and outdated systems. Parks is working to build the elements needed for change: vision, strategic investment framework, and supporting systems.

### 1. **Develop strategic investment priorities**

Perhaps the single most important thing Parks can and must do is to update what is known as the classification policy--a framework for managing the system of parks. Classification should organize the parks system in a compelling way that recognizes different types of experiences, ensures system diversity, and meets public demand. It should be utilized to determine budget priorities and link resources with management goals.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Update the governing classification policy, including vision and implementation guidance. Seek clarification on any needed legislative changes or approvals (e.g., congruence with Primitive Parks act).
- Seek Parks Board approval and adoption of updated classification policy.
- Conduct regular parks user survey to assess visitor satisfaction, service level preferences, and other ways to improve parks and align park offerings with visitor desires and expectations.

### 2. **Build internal systems and processes**

Parks lacks the business focus necessary to advocate for new investment, build partnerships, and balance revenues with expenses. To create this discipline and practice, Parks must develop business strategies and automate the way it tracks maintenance costs, infrastructure investments, and budget revisions.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Create business strategy guidance and templates to implement the classification system.
- Develop initial business strategies for three state parks to pilot the implementation of classification and attract new partners and investment.
- Deploy the asset management software system, including prioritization and tracking of routine maintenance and capital expenditure needs, across all relevant FWP divisions.
- Invest in modern information technology (IT) systems at parks to allow for more efficient management, communication, and revenue capture.

### 3. **Expand staff capacity**

Staffing levels in the Parks Division are profoundly insufficient, with employees stretched to the limit and morale low. Parks must build staff in numbers and capacity to handle basic services, innovate, attract new talent, retain top performers, and cultivate the next generation of leaders.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Driven by the classification process, assess necessary staffing levels, including a peer analysis of other states in our region, and seek necessary authority and funding.
- Explore alternative policy recommendations, such as whether FTEs can be expanded by changing how part-time and short-term staff are approved in the budget process.

- Determine where paid staff are necessary, and if reliant on volunteers, should provide additional training and support.

### **III. Develop a Robust Constituency and Strong Partnerships**

*Goal: Parks has a strong partnership culture that encourages engaged supporters to amplify the case for state parks and active partners to leverage division capacity to improve the state park experience.*

Even with strategic focus and efficient systems, Parks cannot succeed in isolation. A new framework for success needs champions as advocates, and partners to expand resources.

#### **1. Create an “Open for Business” culture at Parks**

Partnerships need an enabling environment that values and invites collaboration. While local partnerships are generally working, Parks needs to improve and expand strategic statewide partnerships.

##### *Recommendations:*

- Create a dedicated Parks Partnership position to advance this key strategic objective.
- Institutionalize the use of partnerships by building a supporting structure at Parks.
  - Learn from other agencies that collaborate and partner well and leverage their experience.
  - Develop partnership guidelines and clear rules, roles and responsibilities.
  - Develop rules to consistently govern concessionaire and corporate sponsorship programs.
  - Remove barriers to the creation of partnership agreements, MOUs, and contracts.
  - Centralize oversight of partnership negotiations and management.
- Motivate and incentivize staff and partners.
  - Tie staff position descriptions and evaluations to the creation of partnerships and partnership performance.
  - Establish specific partnership awards for staff and partners.
  - Prioritize budget allocations that stimulate new supporting partnerships and revenue sources.

#### **2. Build a parks movement**

The best way to get people to understand the value of parks is to get more people to visit parks. By focusing on raising awareness and outreach and expanding park access to all Montanans, Parks has the potential to engage a broader set of advocates, including those who are underserved or disenfranchised.

*Recommendations:*

- Create a high-profile public awareness campaign to elevate the profile of state parks, both the current need and desired future. Renew and expand the Montana State Parks Adventure Challenge and explore other engagement opportunities.
- Develop an engagement strategy to cultivate park champions who can advocate on Parks' behalf. The Montana State Parks Foundation is the logical constituency-build partner and should explore a potential leadership role in creating a broad, engaged movement for parks.
- Explore tangible projects to expand park access, such as more affordable overnight accommodations (including bike campsites and yurts), public transportation options, new trail systems (including motorized and non-motorized), and a camping equipment gear-sharing program (with corporate sponsorship) to increase accessibility.

**3. Seek partners to generate revenue and enrich the park experience**

Currently, Parks plays a largely reactionary role with partners, responding to requests rather than proactively determining where and how to invest limited time, energy, and resources. Parks needs to identify partnerships that can address its highest priority needs, including monetary and non-monetary partners.

*Recommendations:*

- With guidance from an updated classification framework, determine highest priority partnerships to develop and invest in. These will likely include some combination of local communities and local government; Office of Outdoor Recreation, tourism agencies and the Department of Commerce; heritage and historic preservation associations; state and local healthcare providers; tribes; recreation and trails groups; and private businesses.
- Develop a communications framework that promotes collaboration; builds mutual recognition, trust and respect; and elevates Parks' partnership portfolio.
- Develop close collaboration with the nonprofit Montana State Parks Foundation; co-develop a joint annual scope of work, including charitable, community, and business outreach and engagement; maintain regular communication through calls and meetings; and provide prominent co-branding and recognition.
- Expand successful stewardship and service partnerships with AmeriCorps and Montana Conservation Corps; increase the engagement and participation of younger generations as park volunteers and professionals.

**IV. Increase Funding for Parks**

*Goal: Parks has a clear vision and roadmap for success, strong public and legislative support, and a laser focus on increasing and diversifying funding options.*

Revenue and capacity deficits are crippling the ability of Parks to deliver on its mission in almost every way, including public health and safety, maintenance and infrastructure, stewardship of fragile resources, and programming for the public.

## 1. **Develop parks investment “pitch”**

To build confidence in the Legislature and to attract new funding and partners, Parks needs to articulate why state parks matter, why they need new investment, how parks will utilize new funding, and the resulting benefits of new investment. The Division also needs to put forth a compelling vision for parks, trails, and outdoor recreation, and demonstrate new competency and efficiencies in their management of the state parks system.

### *Recommendations:*

- Create an up-to-date inventory of actions that FWP/Parks have taken or are taking to address past problems and accelerate forward-looking solutions.
- Develop a value proposition that articulates the current need, future potential, and return on investment of new funding for state parks.
- Conduct an economic impact analysis of state park visitation and recreation programs to complement and accompany existing FWP reporting and analysis on hunting and angling economic impacts.
- Develop a current assessment of funding needs and priorities for the parks system and how these nest within the classification framework. Begin with a few high profile park units, and then expand to the parks system as a whole.
- Draft Parks’ budget scenarios tied to revenue and expense projections; these should range from pessimistic (including contingency planning for possible service reductions and park closures) to optimistic (including building out the system to meet rising demand and visitor expectations).

## 2. **Engage the state legislature**

Parks has demonstrated, through the Legislative Audit Process, that it is moving in a positive direction and is responsive to legislators’ concerns. Parks now needs engaged state park champions in the Legislature and a realistic engagement strategy that will lead to strong support for increased state funding of Parks.

### *Recommendations:*

- Develop a detailed legislative strategy with appropriate background materials, assignments, roles and responsibilities.
- Focus legislative and committee briefings on financial accountability and transparency, progress made on creating new efficiencies, and the return on higher levels of investment in the parks system.
- Activate state park champions, such as a bipartisan state parks caucus, for the next legislative session to increase attention on park issues.

## 3. **Secure more funding**

Parks needs to explore every funding opportunity available, from concessionaires to legislative options to park user fees to placing a parks funding measure on the ballot. Our final recommendation builds on the critical efforts outlined above and urges Parks to focus on funding as its most pressing priority.

- **Dedicated Public Funds.** New or expanded dedicated funding sources would give Parks additional resources and certainty in their planning and budgeting. Funding sources to be considered include:
  - Light Vehicle Registration Fee. Vehicle registration fees are the largest current funding source for state parks. The Montana Trails Coalition is introducing legislation to increase the fee in the 2019 legislative session. Fee-phasing should be explored, as well as expansion to motorhomes, trailers, fleet vehicles and rental vehicles.
  - Coal Tax Trust Fund. Severance tax revenue paid by coal companies into a trust makes up nine percent of the Parks budget. Moving existing non-protected funds into the constitutionally-protected trust fund could increase growth of the fund and free up existing revenue for operating expenses.
  - Bed Tax. Lodging facility use and sales taxes provide Parks with fifteen percent of its budget. Explore an increase (in the 3% portion of the tax that goes to the general fund) for the development of “destination” parks that would pay economic dividends for Montana businesses and communities.
  - Gas Tax. A bill pending in the Environmental Quality Council of the state legislature would redistribute tax proceeds and includes a provision benefitting Parks. Redistribution should be explored, as well as language to broaden the usage of these funds.
  - Ballot Initiative. A statewide funding mechanism could provide significant funding for parks and trails. Ballot measures are dependent upon voter support and require a significant public awareness campaign and coalition to succeed.
  - Federal Funding. About two percent of the Parks budget comes from federal sources including the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Recreational Trails Program. Explore opportunities for expansion of these funds as well as restitution of Department of Transportation road construction funding.
- **Park Generating Revenues.** Funds generated through the use of state parks need to be reviewed and updated, including:
  - User Fees. This includes park entrance fees, park passes, camping and lodging fees, tours, etc. User fees comprise 21 percent of the overall budget. We suggest beginning with parks that are already revenue positive, those that attract destination visitors, and parks or services that are oversubscribed and would be candidates for variable or yield pricing formulas.
  - Recreation Fee/License. This could include a motorboat fuel fee increase, boat launch fee, or a recreational trail users license. Motorboat users already pay fees through a fuel tax that makes up 11 percent of parks funding. Explore fee-phasing increases and/or license expansion opportunities.
  - Privatization. Contractual arrangements could be made with private entities to operate parks and offset operational costs.

- **Philanthropy/Private Partnerships.** Parks' strategic plan sets a goal of attracting \$4 million in private investment for the parks system by 2020. Current efforts include:
  - Montana State Parks Foundation. This new nonprofit is the philanthropic arm of Parks, successfully raising funds for individual park projects and placing donation boxes in parks. It has the potential to create a statewide endowment.
  - Friends Groups. Various locally-based nonprofits fundraise for specific projects and parks, but need additional support to become more significant revenue generators.
  - Concessionaires. This Parks program is currently underutilized. It needs consistent permitting and oversight, and an exploration of future potential.
  - Corporate Sponsorships. The Montana State Parks Foundation should grow statewide and regional sponsorships in addition to its current roster of local business supporters.
  - Grants. Parks should survey new grant opportunities in the health care, community development, and tourism areas.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

The Parks in Focus Commission seeks public input on these recommendations and creative ideas on how to build the best Montana State Parks system.

These draft recommendations and an online form to submit comments can be found here: [www.chartinganewtomorrow.com/parks-in-focus](http://www.chartinganewtomorrow.com/parks-in-focus). The deadline for submitting public comment on draft recommendation is November 7, 2018.

The final Parks in Focus Commission meeting will be December 14, 2018 at First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park. The public is invited and encouraged to attend.

Please feel free to contact Parks in Focus staff with any questions:  
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