State Parks Commission Considers New Model for Fort Worden State Park

Local News

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Olympia, WA - As part of its regular meeting schedule next week, the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission has added a public meeting to hear comment on various options for realizing Commission direction for Fort Worden State Park to become a life-long learning center.

Most of those options involve a role for the Fort Worden Life Long Learning Center Public Development Authority (PDA) and range from cooperative management to a complete transfer of the park to the PDA. As the result of a years-long planning process, the Commission in 2007 adopted a vision for Fort Worden as a center for life-long learning, a financially sustainable full-service destination providing a broad array of meaningful experiences for a diverse audience of visitors.

The public comment meeting on Fort Worden and PDA is scheduled for 7 to 9 p.m. Wednesday, March 28, in the Theater at Fort Worden State Park, 200 Battery St., Port Townsend. Public comment for individuals will be limited to three minutes so the Commission can hear from as many people as possible. The Commission is expected to consider next steps in governance at Fort Worden State Park during its regular meeting the following day.

The Commission regular meeting begins at 9 a.m. Thursday, March 29, in the Theater at Fort Worden. A full Commission meeting agenda is available online at http://www.parks.wa.gov/agency/commissionmeetings/. Regular meetings of the Commission involve consideration of a variety of statewide Parks issues. Time for public comment also is provided at all regular meetings, which are scheduled six times a year at pre-determined locations around the state.

On the Fort Worden governance issue, the Commission will be asked to consider providing more time for the public, stakeholders and the legislature to learn about the life-long learning center model governance options and express their views to the Commission before a final decision is made.

Fort Worden State Park in Port Townsend is considered by many to be an icon of the state park system. With 433 acres and 11,000 feet of saltwater frontage, the park is known for its large collection of historic buildings from its origins as a 1900-era coastal defense fort. The park is the setting for a variety of festivals, workshops and community events. It is popular for overnight rental of historic homes at the site.

The current discussion follows action in December 2009, when the Commission authorized staff to enter into an agreement with the Centrum Foundation, a non-profit arts organization already housed at Fort Worden State Park. The agreement was to identify milestones that would need to be achieved prior to establishment of a long-term cooperative management agreement for the park. In 2010, Centrum withdrew from the partnership development process, and the Port Townsend Public Development Authority (PDA) (subsequently renamed and now officially chartered as the Fort Worden Life Long Learning Center Public Development Authority) notified the Commission that it wished to take Centrum’s place in being considered as a prospective partner.

In other business, the Commission will consider formally renaming the Fort Worden State Park Commons Building after Fort Worden State Park advocate Nora Porter, who died in October. Porter was a well-known Port Townsend resident who advocated against user fees in state parks. She helped to spearhead a community campaign several years ago to raise money to buy parking for Fort Worden visitors. She was a business owner, school board member and civic leader who loved her community. The Commons building is a state-of-the-art meeting and dining facility that forms the core of the Fort Worden campus.

Also on the agenda is an item to consider a policy for managing special events in state parks with the new Discover Pass requirement in place. Discover Pass was created by the 2011 Legislature to generate revenue no longer available from general fund sources to cover the costs of operating state recreation lands. Starting July 1 of last year, visitors on state-managed recreation lands are required to display a $30 annual or $10 one-day pass on their vehicles. In state parks, this applies to daytime visitors, as camping fees cover access for overnight park visitors.

For almost all events, the policy would require the Discover Pass but would allow park staff and event sponsors to make event logistics easier by estimating size of event and agree on pre-purchase compensation to state parks in lieu of the Pass requirement for event attendees. The policy would allow further provisions in unique cases where alternative fees or lease arrangements could be made in order to balance public service values with agency financial requirements.

The Commission also will consider transfer of a 1.16-acre parcel of land to Pacific County for a county maintenance facility. The property is adjacent to the Willapa Hills Trail and is not considered appropriate for park purposes. In addition, the Commission will consider 2011-13 biennium operating budget options and will hear reports on the 2011-13 supplemental budgets, the agency’s volunteer program and 2012 grant application priorities.

For more information about the Discover Pass, visit www.DiscoverPass.wa.gov. For information about the state park system, visit www.parks.wa.gov