

## **State Parks Commission to Talk Revenue at Special Meeting**

### **Local News**

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission is calling a special meeting next week in Olympia to discuss its spending plan for the remainder of the current budget cycle and to begin identifying priorities for the agency's 2013-15 budget request, due in September.

The meeting is scheduled for 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday, June 18, at the Washington State Parks Headquarters, 1111 Israel Road S.W., Olympia, in the Environmental and Land Use Hearings Office on the third floor. A Commission meeting agenda is available online at [www.parks.wa.gov/agency/commissionmeetings/](http://www.parks.wa.gov/agency/commissionmeetings/). Time for public comment will be provided.

In the 2012 session, the Legislature transferred \$4 million to State Parks from a state Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account, for operations and maintenance of parks as the Commission works to implement a new funding structure, which relies significantly upon sales of the Discover Pass.

The Legislature made clear that the \$4 million in aquatic lands enhancement funds is a one-time transfer from the Recreation Conservation Funding Board-administered grant funds, specifically to be used to operate and maintain state parks as the Commission implements new revenue sources to become more self-supporting.

The Commission will consider authorizing expenditure of approximately \$3 million of the funds for the following priorities:

- Health and safety – Maintenance, equipment, forest health and training
- Additional revenue generation – Marketing through advertising, events and promotions; costs to provide greater WIFI service.
- Efficiency improvements, including purchase of automated ticket machines, maintenance management software and energy audits – all of which improve efficiency, save on staff time and avoid costs.

Washington State Parks has gone through a radical shift in the way it is funded. The Legislature determined that the state park system would primarily be funded through fees for service rather than general fund tax dollars. In the 2007-09 biennium, State Parks received 66 percent of its operating budget from taxes; in 2009-11, it received 30 percent of funding from taxes, and in the current biennium is receiving only 12 percent of its budget from taxes.

During the recession and to help the agency move away from tax funding, the Legislature has worked to provide replacement funding sources for State Parks, including a donation program tied to vehicle license renewals – and the Discover Pass, a \$30 access pass implemented in July 2011. The Discover Pass is now required to visit state parks and other state recreation lands managed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Department of Natural Resources.

Because the Discover Pass was announced and launched quickly last summer, first-year revenues did not come in as high as projected, leaving State Parks \$11 million short of balancing its budget. In February, State Parks used some of its reserve funding and donations, then reduced staffing and programs by \$8 million, shifting approximately one-third of field staff from full-time, year-round, to seasonal in order to meet public service needs during the busy visitor season, May through September.

Though the Commission has been told by the Legislature to expect “zero” general fund tax revenues in the 2013-15 biennium, the Commission has stated it believes that the state should provide some level of support. Staff is asking the Commission to consider requesting \$9 to \$10.5 million in general fund to cover the costs of special pass programs mandated by the Legislature. These programs require State Parks to provide discounted or free passes to certain groups, including disabled veterans and limited-income seniors who qualify. The Commission may consider a larger general fund request to fund a higher service level.

In addition, the Commission will consider priorities from a list of approximately \$40 million worth of projects from several categories:

- Public and employee health and safety, through utility and facility upgrade, repair or replacement
- Projects that allow regulatory environmental and health compliance
- Projects with potential to enhance or generate new revenue
- Historic preservation needs