

Parks Commission will consider Transformation Strategy next week

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - At its regular meeting next week in Olympia, the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission will consider adoption of a transformation strategy intended to provide guidance into the foreseeable future as the agency is financed primarily on use fees.

The meeting is scheduled to begin at 9 a.m. Thursday, March 21, in the Auditorium of the Department of Labor and Industries, 7273 Linderson Way S.W., Tumwater. The Commission will take a break from 2 to 3 p.m., when the proceedings will turn to celebrating the 100th anniversary of the state park system, which was created on March 19, 1913.

A full Commission meeting agenda is available online at www.parks.wa.gov/agency/commissionmeetings/. Time for public comment is provided at all regular meetings, which are scheduled six times a year at pre-determined locations around the state.

The Transformation Strategy under consideration stems from a fast and dramatic shift in State Parks financing in recent years. For decades, Washington State Parks has provided recreation and stewardship of natural, cultural and historic resources from a financial base primarily made up of general tax support. In 2008, when the Recession hit and the state was faced with significant revenue shortfalls, the Legislature began to make dramatic decreases in general funding for State Parks. In 2011, the Legislature created the Discover Pass to help replace lost general fund revenues, but Discover Pass fee revenues are not meeting projections. The Commission concluded in 2012 that State Parks needs a "mix" of funding that includes use fees and donations as well as continued general tax support, if it is to meet its mission to provide benefit to all citizens.

During the past two years, the Commission established the need for a Transformation Strategy to make the changes needed to continue appealing to visitors who now must choose state parks from an array of offerings. Other principles in the strategy include building stronger relationships with volunteers, friends and partners; acquiring appropriate data needed to make strong business decisions; and embracing innovation and technology to ensure relevance and sustainability.

In other business, the Commission will consider policy revisions relating to utility placements on state park land and new fee schedules for authorizing these uses of park lands. Staff each year receive numerous requests for easements for a variety of non-recreational uses of parklands, with the majority for utility placements and roads over, under or through parkland. More than half of State Parks' easement agreements are within former railroad corridors known as rail-trails, properties that were acquired beginning in the early 1980s. Of more than 500 utility placements, nearly half exist without a documented legal agreement authorizing placement. The new policy and fee schedule would standardize fees, make for more efficient management and provide easement holders clear direction and process for new easements.

The Commission also will consider authorizing the exchange of the agency's former Puget Sound Region Office for a commercial property owned by the City of Auburn, which can be used by Parks as working endowment land or divested through public auction. The City property is currently vacant and undeveloped, with a 2013 assessed land value of \$833,000. The former Region Office property is currently zoned Public Use and is currently assessed at \$582,600.

The Commission will hear several reports, including one on the status of ongoing conversations around the future governance at Fort Worden State Park. In December 2012, the Commission authorized staff to negotiate a management agreement with the Fort Worden Public Development Authority for the area of Fort Worden State Park generally referred to as the campus area of the park. All related Commission agenda items are available online at www.parks.wa.gov/FortWorden/ (select Governance 2012).

Other reports include a capital construction program update, a forest health update, an annual Washington Administrative Code review and financial and legislative updates.

Commission work session: A Commission work session is scheduled from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 20, in the Hearings Room of the Environmental and Land Use Hearings Office at Parsons Plaza, State Parks Headquarters Building, 1111 Israel Road S.E., Tumwater. A roundtable discussion with current and former Commissioners will take place from 2:30 to 4 p.m. Other work session topics include: roofed accommodations; stewardship training; sustainability update; community-based projects/friends group; Puget Sound parks; facility assessment; conditions on a past property transfer with Olympic National Park; smoking in campgrounds; reorganization status; Discover Pass business plan; Winter Recreation program; Centennial 2013 events and marketing update. The session is open to the public, however, no public testimony and no formal Commission action are taken at work sessions.

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The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission manages a diverse system of more than 100 state parks and recreation programs, including long-distance trails, boating safety and winter recreation. Washington State Parks will turn 100 years old on March 19, 2013, and will celebrate with events in parks all over the state, all year long. For more information, visit www.parks.wa.gov/events/.

Support state parks by purchasing your annual Discover Pass today, and enjoy a whole year of outdoor fun on Washington's beautiful state-managed recreation lands. For more information, visit www.discoverpass.wa.gov.