

STATE PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY COUNCIL (RSA 216-A:3-k)
July 16, 2009 at 9 a.m., LOB Rooms 305-307

Members Present:

Dick Ober, NHCF, Chairman
Senator Bob Odell, Senate, Vice-Chairman
Senator Margaret Hassan, Senate
Rep Chris Ahlgren, RR&D
Rep Leigh Webb, House
Hon. Ruth Griffin, General public
Susan Arnold, AMC
Paul Doscher, SPNHF
Kathleen Reardon, Citizens Bank
Bill Roberts, Friends of Pisgah
Maggie Stier, NH Preservation Alliance
Craig Mayo, NH Snowmobile Assn
Jeff Gilbert, Business community
Ted Austin, Director, Div. Parks & Recreation
Torene Tango-Lowy, Div Parks, Stand-in clerk

Members Absent:

Rep Susan Kepner, RR&D
Dick Huot, Tri-Country CAP
Others Present: (see sign-in sheets)
Liz Ignacio, Governor's office
Peter Marcouillier, for Councilor Burton
Exec. Councilor Pignatelli
Rep Peter Bolster, Belknap 5
Rep David Borden, Rockingham 18
Rep Daniel Carr, Cheshire 4
Rep Sue Gottling, Sullivan 3
Rep Andy Renzullo, Hillsborough 27
Rep Jeff St. Cyr, Belknap 5
Rep Stephen Shurtleff, Merrimack 10
Rep Judith Spang, Strafford 7
Rep Frank Tupper, Merrimack 6
Rep Lucy Weber, Cheshire 2
Friends Groups and Public members
Media reporters
Division consultants and staff

Call to Order Chairman Ober called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m.

Approval of Minutes Hon. Griffin motioned to approve the May 29, 2009 minutes as submitted. Mr. Gilbert seconded. Motion was approved unanimously.

Chairman's Remarks Mr. Ober thanked Council members and the public for attending. He acknowledged the public's passion for state parks although the meeting is not a formal hearing, he will take public comment. A packet of information is available, which includes: the agenda; minutes of May 29, 2009; RSA 216-A:3-k, State park system advisory council; RSA 216-A:3-c, Development plan; and the 2006 Report of the state parks study commission. Mr. Ober reviewed the role of the council, as set by law. Council members introduced themselves.

Mr. Ober noted that the draft strategic plan released in June was incomplete and commended Commissioner Bald for making the decision to withdraw it.. He noted that the public's concern for parks stems from a fundamental paradox between the intent of the park system under RSA 216-A:1, adopted in 1961, which prioritizes protection and preservation as the first purpose of the system; and the 1991 legislation that made Parks self-funded. The Division runs a deficit each year, currently at \$2.1 million. If we truly believe in the state park system, we must stay engaged to find collective solutions, to include members of legislature, advocates, the advisory council, as well as the agency. Mr. Ober expressed the Council's confidence in Director Ted Austin's abilities to lead the way to a stronger and more sustainable state parks system.

Director's Remarks Director Austin thanked Mr. Ober and acknowledged that, although there was much hard work put into the strategic plan, the net result caused much public consternation. He takes responsibility for the plan and will resolve the issues. The release of the draft plan at the end of the budget cycle perhaps contributed to the perception that state parks were an act of desperation and an intent to simply throw things overboard as a short-term solution to financial preservation. It was not the intent that parks were for sale. The draft plan was not complete and it was appropriate that

Commissioner Bald retracted it. The Division had erred on the side of keeping to a schedule for completing the plan, and the draft did not include all the information that it should have, such as the goals and objectives and the appendices that detail how the parks were categorized. Communication with the advisory council and the public could have been better. Director Austin appreciates that NH citizens want to be involved.

The Division will target mid-August or September for the next release of the plan, and will have a more meaningful dialogue with the public, to include additional public sessions, better communications and improved distribution of documents. He suggests a subcommittee of the advisory council to hold work sessions with the Division. The challenge of the strategic planning process is what compelled Director Austin to take the job.

10-Year Development Plan

He recognized and welcomed Executive Councillor Deborah Pignatelli, several members of the General Court, reporters, and other guests.. He referred to a packet of information distributed to all attendees. He reviewed recommendations from the State Park Study Commission's findings and recommendations from their 2006 report, which was the genesis of the 10-Year Development Plan. The Historic Sites Bureau was established in 2007. In FY08, legislature approved \$6 million of the \$20M requested for state park capital improvements. The strategic plan is a current project; it examines the Division's revenue streams and partnerships. An audit was completed in 2008, and the Division now publishes an annual report. The State Park System Advisory Council was established in 2007, and will review current statutes and make recommendations for recodification.

Mr. Ober reviewed the legislative requirements of the development plan, including a comprehensive inventory, an evaluation of park operations strengths and weaknesses, identification of properties that need expansion and those that are surplus to the state's needs.

Board Discussion Mr. Ober yielded the floor to council members for comment.

Mr. Gilbert: The Division has the right leadership. The plan process is sound, but perhaps too rushed. A compilation of public comment will help formulate corrections to the plan and guide the council.

Ms. Arnold: She is concerned about the timeline for revising the draft; this is a difficult time of year with Parks in summer operation and many legislative members and the public on vacation. She recommends the revision not be rushed.

Ms. Griffin: The media was not kind; the public knew nothing of the other parks within the system, only of their particular park of interest. Press releases can help to educate the public. DOT is a partnership opportunity.

Rep. Webb: He read a 1986 press release that outlined the Division's ideas and goals and asked the public to get involved – we are still talking about the same issues. The state historic sites also need a comprehensive plan, including an interpretive program. We tend to act only when in crisis. He found the picketing at the Peterborough hearing on the plan to be encouraging: the public recognizes that they might lose something and may understand that state parks are a service that may need tax dollars. Leadership needs the strength and foresight to develop policies and procedures to protect resources. Constant communication with legislature can help make needed changes to legislation.

Rep. Ahlgren: As a new member, he can provide "new eyes" to the proceedings. At issue is how Parks is funded. Legislature has provided funding for capital projects, but mandates self-funded operations. Running the operation like a business may maximize profit, but not necessarily preserve

the resource. Maximizing the revenue stream requires understanding your market, identifying places where people are willing to pay, and conserving those resources that will maintain the maximization of revenue streams. For the historic sites, the development of Friends groups is paramount. They can apply for LCHIP funding and unite government-private partnering.

Sen. Odell: The lack of cohesion and information sharing is a “bump in the road” and part of the process. Such bumps reveal new opportunities and result in positive outcomes. The newspaper headlines were not helpful in delivering real information to the public. The plan must proceed in a thoughtful manner. Although the deadline for the plan is this fall, he will work with the legislature to reset the deadline. The Division could consider new ways to communicate with the public long-term and ongoing, including press conferences and the internet. His energies and time must be focused, and he asks “what can Odell do?”

Mr. Doscher: He suggests tuning-up the process, including: the true cost of adequate stewardship by park unit, to include operating and capital costs; extending the plan deadline beyond September 30th; consider the plan procedures used by the WMNF; have the relative park scores reflect the legislative mandates by the priorities. He asks if the Division gets the assistance it needs to provide adequate stewardship. He raised the question of whether part of the challenge is the way state agencies are organized..

Mr. Roberts: Friends groups provide a valuable and necessary resource for state park assistance. Such groups need more attention from the Division. They can provide good advice and free labor.

Ms. Reardon: The draft plan did not reflect all the good work that was done. The Division needs to be careful about the timeline, to include schedules for communications activities and for data analysis. She supports a council subcommittee to assist the Division. Members can use their networks to assist the Division with communications.

Ms. Stier: Legislative priorities need to be addressed, as Parks is neither a not-for-profit nor a business. The historic sites are mission driven and can't run as a business based upon revenues. It is in the state's interest to invest in and conserve its historic resources. Such sites contribute to the tourism economy and to the business and local community. Friends groups have great potential and need to be engaged; she is encouraged by the Division's development of a Volunteer Coordinator position. The Friends of the Fells Estate provide a good model.

Mr. Mayo: He is concerned about the timeline. County snowmobile club meetings don't start until September and would like to have input. NHSA, with its network of grant-funded clubs, is another resource for understanding volunteer coordination.

Sen. Hassan: It is best to over-communicate. The council is committed to park resources and ensuring public access to parks, as these resources are important to the state. We must keep an open mind to different ways of doing things.

Mr. Gilbert: The council can assist in the evaluation of improvements to and expansion of parks. The plan should include the economic benefits state parks contribute towards tourism and the rooms and meals tax, and should therefore receive some General Funds.

Mr. Doscher: Cultivating Friends groups is important and the infrastructure is needed to do it right. The Forest Society has a full-time coordinator, and can serve as a model. Groups need to be recognized through constant communications and recognition events. Such programs will require some cost.

Public Input and Questions Mr. Ober recognized the public wishing to speak.

Rep. Daniel Carr, Cheshire 4: The data behind the priority ratings of park properties was not included in the draft. An analysis by geographic region would be helpful, as each region has its emphasis and identity, such as camping and the ATV Park.

Rep. Peter Bolster, Belknap 5: The Town of Alton has no town parks, but an inventory of all recreational lands yielded 25 properties and highlighted public-private cooperation. The challenge is the cost of maintenance and the competition for funding against all other governmental needs. We should look at the total system that includes state parks and local lands.

Mr. John DeYoung, Kingston: The newly formed Friends of Madison Boulder is a good example of a Friends group that can assist with park maintenance needs. A theme that runs through parks is the problem of vandalism, graffiti and trash. The towns don't have the resources, but law enforcement is needed. Is it the town or the state's responsibility to maintain the roads? A change in ownership does not solve the funding problem for maintenance. Law enforcement needs to be included in the budget; perhaps have an enforcement arm within the agency or give the staff enforcement powers. Has the Division applied for federal stimulus monies? *Answer: Yes, but only the Student Conservation Association program was funded.* Does the Division use inmate labor? *Yes.* Radio and TV, rather than just newspapers, are recommended options for communicating with the public.

Rick Russman, Kingston: He served on the SB5 study commission. The timing of the report was good: it got the public worked up. Investment in parks should be approached as an economic development tool. He worked at Kingston State Park and the staff was much larger then. Self-funding is not working. Running state government as a business is not as simple as it seems. Education should be a factor for tourism. For many MA visitors, it is their only opportunity to experience the outdoors. The children represent future family visitation. Consider more winter recreational opportunities and camp programs. The Town of Kingston can help its local state park. The Volunteer Coordinator position is important. Parks are not as attractive as they once were. Raising visitor ship by making parks more inviting will raise revenue. Everyone needs to be involved, including the business community.

Rep. Frank Tupper, Merrimack 6, RR&D Vice-chair: Many park users are from the working class or are underemployed: they cannot afford Nantucket. State parks offer a quality vacation and outdoor opportunities for youth. He asked BOT Chief Chris Gamache about the new non-motorized trails coordinator. *Gamache: We do not have the funds to hire for this but we have the pilot program started with AMC.*

Rep. Jeff St. Cyr, Belknap 5: He is a student of the hospitality industry. Since the public session at Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion, he has visited 25 state parks including Daniel Webster and Weeks historic sites. They suffer from deferred maintenance. Marketing efforts should include Face book and You Tube to capture the young audience. *Mr. Ober commented that we, as a people, need to decide what historic resources we value. For example, we would not let the Webster statue at the State House fall in disrepair. Mr. Doscher informed attendees that the 100th anniversary of the Weeks Act that established the national forest system takes place in 2011. Weeks State Park is an important memorial to that achievement.*

Rep. Judith Spang, Strafford 7, RR&D Chair: She agreed with Rep. Tupper that state parks not be made unaffordable in its pursuit to maximize revenue. The state must proceed with dignity. The draft plan was perceived as arbitrary, as the qualitative and quantitative data were not included. The plan will have economic and recreational impacts. Interested parties should be at the table, as they too know the parks resource values and can suggest how to make parks viable. More input is needed in

the evaluation process, including a look at internal park operations and the external view of the park system.

Katheryn Holmes, Newbury Conservation Commission Chair: The Lake Sunapee Protective Assn. created a school program called "Love Your Lakes" to educate children. The Division should consider similar programs to connect children to the state parks and develop stewardship. Children are a resource; we should reconnect them to park resources where they will learn to respect those resources. The Division could consider parking kiosks, as used in CA.

Brian Wolf, Ahern State Park Advisory Committee Chair: The advisory committee can be called upon to assist the Division with Ahern.

Mitch Call, Sharon: He is a member of the Friends of the Wapack, but his comments are his own. He provided written comments. He gave a brief history of the Wapack Trail and the efforts of the Friends including a total of 1,400 work hours over 21 miles. The Friends helped Greenfield State Park manager Harry Sloan with ice storm cleanup of 60 work hours. The Friends show the dedication of the state's citizenry and is an example of partnering. Each park has its own strong advocates. Self-funding has not worked. Commissioner Bald's interview on NHPR mentioned that the Division is 3.2% of the state's budget, yet its contribution to the tourism industry is much greater than that percentage. The Friends of the Wapack can also serve as a model for partnerships.

Mr. Ober reminded attendees that the deadline for comments on the strategic plan is July 27, 2009. He summarized the themes heard today:

- a) There is no one answer; we will need to be creative.
- b) Don't rush the plan because of the Sept. 30 deadline. Work with legislators to extend the deadline.
- c) Get more public and Friends input as the plan is being developed.
- d) Need more direct communications, using new tools.
- e) Value partnerships. Create a framework to manage volunteers.
- f) There is a paradox between preservation/protection of resources and funding/revenues. Parks need to remain accessible to all income levels.
- g) More information and data, including the qualitative methodology, needs to be provided to make the connection to the results and to define the strategic direction.
- h) The state should proceed with dignity and pride for its heritage. We are one of the more wealthy states and need to make a commitment to its park resources.

Mr. Ober announced that he and Senator Odell would follow up with Director Austin to discuss next steps. He announced he would ask other Council members for assistance moving forward.

Adjournment The meeting adjourned at 11:25 a.m.

Next Meeting The next meeting will be in August. The council will continue to meet monthly.

Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy.