

A new model of California's parks

April 25, 2013 - The Union, by Matt Renda

Western Nevada County features three state-administered parks within its borders, featuring a wealth of recreational opportunities along with historically significant sites that demonstrate a substantial slice of California's history.

In the wake of recent financial scandals and popular accusations of widespread mismanagement, the California State Parks Department is exploring new ways to finance its 280-park system on a sustainable basis

In 2011, the California State Parks Department announced that due to increasing financial constraints, it would be shuttering 70 of its 280 parks (25 percent) in an effort to save \$22 million over the course of two fiscal years.

South Yuba River State Park and Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park were included on the closure list, spawning an outpouring of local outrage against those who intended to close the popular recreational destinations and support for those that collaborated to save them.

Led by diverse organizations, including South Yuba River Citizens League, The Olmsted Fund, the Malakoff Diggins Park Association and the South Yuba River State Park Association, signatures were collected, donations were garnered, and protestors were mobilized, resulting in the temporary removal of South Yuba River State Park from the list.

Meanwhile, many key players scrambled behind the scenes to rescue Malakoff Diggins, striking a deal that leveraged about \$50,000 to keep the Visitors Center and historic village of North Bloomfield open three days a week (Friday through Sunday) during the summer months.

In July 2012, while the department was under duress from legislators for failing to provide specifics regarding the rationale behind the selection of the 70 endangered parks, a scandal involving the willful concealment of about \$22 million by top financial officials within the department broke.

Director Ruth Coleman resigned and was promptly replaced by Anthony Jackson, a retired Marine Corps major general.

"We acknowledge that unfortunate and improper actions occurred and need to be fixed," Jackson said during a recent legislative hearing, adding the department has a new leadership team in place.

In March, the Little Hoover Commission, an independent state oversight agency, released a 122-page report that asserted the department's old model is obsolete.

“To thrive and to protect and preserve the natural and cultural treasures entrusted to the state, the California Department of Parks and Recreation needs a new operation model built around shared management, innovation, greater transparency and the expectation that it generate more revenue from its operations,” the report states.

Revenue generation

The South Yuba River State Park implemented paid parking at the Bridgeport Crossing, a popular destination for recreators looking for access to the emerald waters of the Yuba River.

“It’s been great,” said Marilyn Linkem, superintendent of the Sierra District of the parks. “We’ve been able to increase revenue to the point where we have two new full-time park rangers.”

Empire Mine State Historic Site, the third local state park, was never endangered as it is heavily visited by locals who use the trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding and as a popular wedding site and event location.

“It’s right in town,” Linkem said.

Malakoff Diggins, which is similarly centered on evoking the Sierra Foothills rich mining legacy, is comparatively remote, does not see the same level of visitation and has struggled to remain protected from potential closure plans as a result.

Caleb Dardick, executive director of SYRCL, who was instrumental in creating the momentum behind saving South Yuba River State Park, is attempting bring various groups that have a stake in keeping Malakoff open and viable to the table to formulate solutions.

Dardick has continued to offer the installation of a large solar field capable of generating power for the visitors center and other structures at the park as a means of saving about \$70,000 per year.

“State Parks has to perform a (required environmental analysis),” Dardick said. “If we get the green light, I can bring solar providers to the table to hopefully get the systems at cost or through some donations.”

Linkem said she has delegated the duty of performing a pre-project analysis to determine the feasibility of a solar installation at the park.

Advocates for the importance of Malakoff Diggins to the local community on the San Juan Ridge continue to emerge.

James Berardi, superintendent of Twin Ridges School District, said schools across the state use the park as an important field trip destination where students can glean a glimpse of hydraulic mining’s impact on the ecology.

Also, visitors to the parks support businesses like Mother Truckers, Berardi said.

“It’s important to the families of this community,” he said.

When the North Columbia Schoolhouse Cultural Center hosts the Sierra Storytelling Festival in mid-July, the center’s signature event, people have historically used the campground at Malakoff Diggins as a cost-effective overnight stay, said center Executive Director Jeff Adams.

“We heard from people who said they weren’t going to come because the campground was closed,” he said. “We are losing some customers.”

Robert Trent, executive director of the Nevada County Economic Resource Council, said all three parks “play a key role in attracting visitors from outside our region and bringing revenue into our county.”

According to a recent survey conducted by the council, lodging operators said hiking, family activities, biking, snow skiing and romantic getaways received the most responses for what people do when they come to Nevada County.

“Our state parks attract thousands of outdoor enthusiasts, cultural heritage tourists, and day-trippers, to our area,” Trent said. “During their visits, they sleep, eat, shop and play in Nevada County — supporting our local business community.”

Economists estimate California state parks generate as much as \$4 billion annually for the state.

A new model

“In 2014, California will either celebrate the 150th anniversary of its state park tradition by revitalizing its Department of Parks and Recreation or bemoan its failure to set a new course,” the Little Hoover report states.

The first step in establishing a new course is the ability to be able to assess the financial condition of each park, said Roy Stearns, a spokesman for the parks department.

In the past, the parks divided up their budget by districts, as they had maintenance workers, rangers and other employees work at multiple parks within a district, making it difficult to know how much time staff spent at one location versus the other.

However, Assembly Bill 1478, which stipulates no park can close during the 2012-13 and 2013-14 fiscal years, also directs the parks department to be able to analyze expenditures and revenues on a park-by-park basis, Stearns said.

While this will be a helpful analytical tool, Dardick said individual parks should not be made to be profitable, as parks in urban areas such as Los Angeles and San Francisco should contribute to the welfare of the system as a whole because they generate revenue well in excess of their expenses,

Stearns agreed.

“Historic parks like Malakoff don’t make any money,” Stearns said. “But they are very important for California, and it is justified that they remain open.”

For Jeff Adams, who wandered over to Malakoff a couple weeks ago, the importance of its “horrible beauty” should be preserved for generations.

“It’s a moonscape and an important reminder about the type of impact we have on this earth,” he said.

To contact Staff Writer Matthew Renda, email mrenda@theunion.com or 530-477-4239.