

Rescuing Malakoff

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California State Assemblyman Brian Dahle, second from left, tours the Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park Thursday morning, along with Caleb Dardick, executive director of SYRCL, Nevada County Supervisor Hank Weston and Matthew Green, Sierra District Superintendent.

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The diesel generators that supply Malakoff Diggins with energy cost \$60,000 per year to run. The generators are also out of compliance with the California Air Resources Board.

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Matthew Green, California State Parks Superintendent of Sierra District, shows a delegation of lawmakers and nonprofit leaders the area where solar panels could be installed.

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Assemblyman Brian Dahle joined a contingent of local leaders to tour Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park Thursday with the intent of exploring ways to salvage the state-run recreational area that remains in danger of being shuttered.

“The history here is just awesome,” said Dahle, who was visiting the site of a former hydraulic mining operation turned park for the first time. “We need to get people visiting. But I think the cool thing about this is that the local people are involved.”

California Park Ranger Don Schmidt, who has spent several years supervising three major state parks in Nevada County — Malakoff, South Yuba River State Park and Empire Mine State Historic Park — said the park on the San Juan Ridge has experienced a sharp decline in visitation over the years.

“Our visitation has steadily dropped from a high of about 25,000 people a year back in the late 1980s down to about 5,000 people (per year) or less right now,” he said.

The considerable decrease is largely due to an inability to keep the campgrounds open, which are popular with weekend campers in the summer season, Schmidt said. But part of the reason the campgrounds are shuttered is due to the fiscal difficulties the entire park service has endured since budget woes afflicted the entire state beginning roughly in the 2008-09 fiscal year.

While the park service traditionally used revenue from highly visited park sites to funnel money to less visited sites, the current focus has revolved around making each of the 270 parks in the system financially sustainable.

Malakoff Diggins has fared poorly under the new era of analyzing each park, as high energy costs — between \$60,000 and \$80,000 annually — to run two diesel generators combined with low visitation to the campgrounds have painted the picture of an entity with significant fiscal concerns.

South Yuba River Citizens League Executive Director Caleb Dardick and Nevada County Supervisor Hank Weston have invested effort and grant money into exploring whether the installation of solar panels at the site would present a solution.

Sierra District Superintendent Matt Green, with California State Parks, said the parks department has hired consultant Diane Cassano to analyze the different energy options — including connecting to Pacific Gas & Electric utility wires located about two and half miles away, buying more efficient diesel generators or taking the solar option. The parks department will provide a cost estimate for each option and present them to the public, Green said.

While the parks department is attracted to the notion of green energy presented by the solar project, drawbacks include the possibility for vandalism or theft and the prospect of cost associated with maintenance and upkeep, Green said.

“We like solar obviously because it is green, but we are in favor of whatever system is the most efficient and most economical and will keep the park open,” Dardick said.

Dahle said the beleaguered parks department, wracked by scandal and fiscal mismanagement in recent years, is on the road to recovery.

“I think they are moving in the right direction,” Dahle said, noting the assessment of costs associated with running each individual park. “Local communities that get tourism from the parks want to know what the cost is for each park. The state wasn’t telling us what the costs are, so the community that wanted to help out, needed to know the goals.”

Dahle said those goals are now more clear but more still needs to be done.

Green said installation of a cost-effective energy system to replace the diesel generators may cost in the realm of \$250,000 to \$500,000 — a lofty fundraising goal.

“Parks does not have that money,” Green said. Weston disagreed.

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but you have a chunk of money that was found,” Weston said, referring to \$22 million that was willfully hidden by parks department employees for about a decade. “The people own this park. The money is there and it can be done.”

Green said decisions about allocations are “above his pay grade” but said the parks department is in the business of keeping parks open, not shutting them.

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