

## Panel urges overhaul of California parks system

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A panel created by the Legislature to review state parks operations reported Friday that the Department of Parks and Recreation is underfunded and mired in outdated bureaucracy, and that the parks system is out of reach for many poor people in urban areas.

[The report](#) from the Parks Forward Commission calls for the creation of a special team to work for two years to address operational issues within the state parks department, and for the formation of a new nonprofit to raise money for the parks system.

“Department employees take pride in protecting and sharing state parks’ assets, but are hampered by a department that is debilitated by an outdated organizational structure, underinvestment in technology and business tools, and a culture that does not inspire or reward collaboration or innovation,” the report says.

The Parks Forward Commission was created by state lawmakers after The Sacramento Bee reported in 2012 that parks leaders had hidden more than \$20 million, even as they moved to close 70 state parks because of a budget shortfall.

Nearly all the parks stayed open, but the episode created renewed focus on the state parks operation.

“Our plan is ambitious; it is also achievable,” Parks Forward Commission co-chair and former state Sen. Christine Kehoe said in a prepared statement. “It is a blueprint for transforming how state parks are run, how they protect the state’s natural and cultural resources, and how they will serve all Californians and attract other visitors. It’s not designed to dwell upon past problems, but to turn the page to a bright future through fundamental change.”

Among other things, the panel will recommend:

- Creating a transformation team within the Department of Parks and Recreation that is “empowered to transform the department’s organizational structure and update its outdated systems, processes, tools and technology.”
- Forming a nonprofit public benefit organization to work on projects in collaboration with the department, perhaps including increasing overnight accommodations in parks. The report said the nonprofit would complement the existing California State Parks Foundation.
- Increasing park access for visitors from low-income areas of the state, in part by providing “areas for active recreation like soccer fields, larger picnic areas for multigenerational family gatherings, special events, multilingual historic and cultural resource interpretation, and accessible overnight lodging alternatives.” The report said the department should set a goal of bringing park visitation in line with California’s demographic makeup in 10 years.

The report laments volatile state funding and said general fund reductions and deferred maintenance “have compromised the state’s ability to manage and sustain the state park system.” But the report says it is unclear what the parks system should cost, saying the state must first determine what level of funding is necessary.

At current budget levels, it says, “existing funding no longer guarantees the promise of the park vision to future generations.”

John Laird, secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency, praised the report.

“There is an urgent need to transform our parks so they are accessible to all Californians, engage younger

generations, and promote the healthy lifestyles and communities that are uniquely Californian,” he said in a prepared statement. “There is no reason that California’s state parks cannot be a model for our nation and the world. This bold report sets us on the path to make that happen.”

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