

Sustainability of the California State Parks System and the Need for a New Paradigm

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As president of both a local nonprofit cooperating association for a state park, and president of the umbrella organization for all nonprofit cooperating association partners for state parks, I have a unique perspective of the micro and macro workings of the California State Park System from a nonprofit point of view. One of the most important points to understand is that the California State Parks System is larger than all of us! It encompasses more than the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and its staff; it also includes nonprofit partners, for-profit and nonprofit concessionaires, various interest groups, the public, the surrounding businesses and communities, and the many resources within the system. The challenge is for these entities to work together to make California State Parks a more viable and better functioning system. Recent budget cuts have brought to light—and further exacerbated—many issues in the partnerships among these entities. And there is little question that the system, as it is now structured, is not working. The reality is that this crisis has brought about a good opportunity to review the system, find the parts that are working, and revamp those that are not. In short, the system requires a new paradigm.

Many questions have been raised as a result of the draconian budget cuts forced on state parks and the release of the closure list of 70 of California's State Parks in May of 2011. How can we save these 70 parks from closure? Who will be the players in keeping these parks open and what roles will they play? How can we protect the remaining state parks not yet slated for closure and what will happen to the California State Park System? What will it look like going forward? How can we prevent this type of crisis in the future and make the system self-sustaining? I am sure the list goes on, but the key point here is that we are all in this together, and as such, our solutions need to reflect a true partnership among the entities involved. I hope to answer some of these questions from the nonprofit co-op viewpoint.

Who are the key players? Who should handle which key functions of park operations?

I have been asked to address a number of issues about state parks and their nonprofit partners, officially called "Cooperating Associations" or co-ops. We currently number over 90 organizations, several of which have been resurrected as a result of this current economic crisis. Co-ops enter into an official cooperating association contractual agreement with the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). Co-ops vary just as much as state parks they partner with: some serve as the nonprofit arm of a single park and others serve a group of parks in a specific area. The original purpose for our organizations was to raise funds that would remain at a specific park or group of parks to support interpretive programs, rather than be redistributed to all parks during the budgeting process. But co-ops have

developed into more than fundraising arms of state parks, with many co-ops entering into concession agreements, offering interpretive programs to the public, training volunteers, running major capital campaigns and more. Co-ops throughout the state vary in size, complexity and capacity as much as the parks they represent, and this is an important factor in considering the role of park partners in key functions of park operations.

There are many functions within the state park system that are currently handled in a variety of configurations throughout the state. With the current budget cuts, many co-ops are being asked to do more in areas that were previously the sole terrain of DPR. Facing park closures, some co-ops are even considering Operating Agreements, facilitated by the passage of AB 42 in 2011. Although some organizations may have the ability to handle all aspects of park operations, most do not, and there are a number of functions that many believe are better left to DPR to provide: law enforcement, environmental research studies, water treatment, management of natural or cultural resources, etc. In some cases, co-ops have the capacity to handle some of these functions, but the reality is that these are the exceptions rather than the rule. But outside of these specialized key functions, many co-ops and other park partners are able to take on functions currently run by DPR, and indeed many have already done so in several ways. One size does not fit all here, and the capacities of each partner must be evaluated in conjunction with the park needs in order to determine the best constellation or configuration. The best way to understand this is to review some models that are already working—and working very well.

Throughout the state there are many outstanding models of what works with state parks. The Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation (SBTHP) is probably the most outstanding example of successful state park operations through a nonprofit organization. Even in this struggling economy, this organization has been able to manage state parks in Santa Barbara and, within the past few years, purchased a new property for state parks and developed it into a revenue-generating park before it has even opened its “gates” to the public. This organization works closely with DPR, but SBTHP manages all functions related to its parks and has no DPR staff at parks under its control. Indeed other co-ops often consult with them when taking on additional roles and functions in their own areas. The SBTHP model was made possible by legislation in the 1960s specific to their organization.

The Crystal Cove Alliance is another excellent example of nonprofits being successful partners in state park operations. Several years ago, this organization applied for and was rewarded a concession contract for the cottages at Crystal Cove State Historic Park. The concession side of their organization has been highly successful and is used by nonprofits throughout the state as a model of how nonprofits can also serve as concessionaires. In addition, they have been very successful in fundraising, facilitating historic renovations, and providing interpretive program support.

Other successful models of nonprofit partnerships within state parks exist throughout the state: Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks, Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods, Mendocino Area Parks Association, and Mountain Parks, are but a few examples. They have developed highly successful interpretive programs that generate revenue and other mechanisms to support their parks.

In addition, several parks combine separate concessions and nonprofits together. Old Town San Diego is a recent example of a concessionaire developing the business side of a state

park while a separate nonprofit provides the fundraising and interpretive functions, and both partner with DPR and each other. Hearst Castle is another example of DPR, nonprofit co-op and concessions within the same park.

One common denominator with all these successful models is that the parks themselves have incredibly popular commodities that can easily be marketed, and they have thrived (or at least survived) despite economic downturn. They have also, as a result of their success, been able to develop complex operations including several paid staff members. Not all parks are this fortunate. Many are faced with increasing costs and little or no revenue generation. While one could argue that the closure list that was released last year is a representation of these less fortunate parks, I would argue that other factors have led to the discrepancy between the parks that have been successful in revenue generation and those who have not.

For example, of the parks on the closure list, the historic parks are the hardest hit. These specific parks account for 45% of all the historic parks in the state park system: a staggering percentage. The reality may be that in our modern media age, without some connection to the younger generations' fascination with technology, history is a tough sell! Many of these parks are small, with little or no revenue generation capabilities. Despite some efforts to be creative with revenue generation ideas, we are faced with the issues of an institutional resistance to new ideas and change, resource protection, preservation, insufficient staff to develop and manage new and creative programs, insufficient staff to hold regular events at the parks, and other limiting factors.

Pio Pico State Historic Park, in Los Angeles, is a prime example of a park limited by its very nature, and its current inclusion in the larger state park system. With historic parks like ours, resource preservation is without question, both a priority and a necessity. Weddings, reunions, company picnics, and Quinceañera celebrations (a common celebration for 15-year old Hispanic girls) are all viable revenue generation options for our park. However, with the current level of budget cutbacks, park staff is not available during their regularly scheduled time for event oversight. Funds must be collected to cover increased staff costs for events (specifically for over-time hours), making the cost of renting the location prohibitive, especially for local residents in the surrounding impoverished communities. And without staff to develop and manage a special event rental protocol at our park, this possible revenue generation has gone unexplored.

How did Pio Pico State Historic Park find itself on the closure list?

The development of the state park closure list has been a highly debated topic. The criteria used to determine inclusion on the list has been very controversial and at times unclear. However, it was no surprise to me or my board of directors that Pio Pico State Historic Park was on the closure list. This was not because we agreed with the group of park superintendents who decided our fate, but because we had seen the writing on the wall for some time. Our park is a prime example of a park with many factors against it. Some have even called us the "step-child of state parks." But we do not believe that our story is unique.

In order to understand the plight of Pio Pico State Historic Park, it is important to understand its history. The adobe mansion of Pio Pico (last Governor of Mexican California) was first saved from destruction back in 1907 by a nonprofit organization and deeded to the city of Whittier. The city then deeded the mansion and a small plot of land surrounding it, to the

state. It became a State Historic Park in 1927, with the remaining land still owned by Whittier and leased by the state to complete the 4.52 acres that make up the park today. Over the years it has gone through several renovations, several nonprofit co-ops, several district designations (Los Angeles, Orange County and the Inland Empire), and countless DPR park staff members. After several years of being closed for renovations after the 1987 and 1994 Los Angeles earthquakes nearly destroyed the adobe mansion, the park reopened to great fanfare in the fall of 2003. Our staff included a full-time Interpreter, Ranger, and Maintenance worker along with several seasonal, part-time staff for interpretation and maintenance, all dedicated solely to our park. Staff was also supplemented with a few dozen eager volunteers (including myself). That first year we logged over 12,000 visitors, held numerous special events, and were the pride of the community. We were open five days a week and welcomed throngs of schoolchildren into the park to study local and California history.

Fast-forward a few years – our staff and resources started to dwindle and continued to decline year after year. Today we have 2 part-time staff members (one interpretive and one maintenance) dedicated to our park. Our ranger is shared among four Los Angeles area parks, and our former park interpreter is now shared with several parks across Los Angeles (she is connected to the park electronically rather than physically). Our hours have been cut incrementally over the past several years, until we are currently open only two days a week (Saturday and Sunday), with school tours (our former “bread and butter”) being offered by appointment only on Fridays and some Thursdays, when staff is available. Our special events are limited to days when no other event is being held at another state park in the Los Angeles area and/or when our nonprofit can solicit enough volunteers to help put on a special event. We are faced with the park being closed on any day that either of our two staff members is absent due to illness or some type of emergency.

Staffing is not the only issue facing the park. Like many California State Parks, deferred maintenance has impacted our park both from an historical perspective and an operational perspective. The adobe is in desperate need of repair. The main wall of the house is currently buckling due to the excessive rains a few years ago, and the outside walls continue to flake off and crumble without the necessary maintenance required for adobe structures. Many of the adobe bricks are exposed on several walls. Park staff track cracks in the walls over time, but no repairs have occurred since the 2003 reopening. We currently have grant funds ready and available to fix a portion of the roof, but the work is on hold at this time due to the impending closure. And additional grant funds, which were to be sought in collaboration with the local conservation corps have also been put on hold during the closure threats. Yes: this historic building is disintegrating not necessarily from lack of funds at this point, but from bureaucratic processes. Funds are available, but the state processes have halted the possibility of this work being done at this time. This situation is not unique to our park.

From an operational perspective, budget cuts have left most of our infrastructure non-functional. Our phone system works intermittently; currently it does not go to voicemail, so callers often believe the park to be closed even when it is open. But there are times that it completely fails, leaving park staff unable to make or receive calls at all. Our Internet connection also fails every few weeks. Plumbing has been a constant source of problems, and the historic gardens that were replanted during the \$3M renovation are not receiving the water they need, so the plants are slowly dying off. This has impacted grant funding we have received to plant additional trees. Once again, we have been able to secure funds, but

the use of those funds has been impeded by the closure process. While we continue to meet with our partners regarding these grant funds, the process has been painfully slow, and we fear that this will make it more difficult to obtain future funding.

Other examples of our broken infrastructure are added to the already lengthy list on a constant basis. Our administrative offices no longer have any air conditioning, and the heating system was just recently repaired in time for the winter months. Even our video projector, which played the story of Pio Pico for visitors, is broken, and funds are not available to repair it. Some days we simply feel like the little engine who could...trying to make it up the hill against all odds!

And to their credit, the DPR staff members at our park are nothing short of heroic. They continue on despite all the setbacks, budget cuts, and a sheer sense of desperation. With all of the staffing cuts to state parks, they are disconnected and isolated from the larger structure at times, but they have remained dedicated to our park. Most recently they have seen an increase in gang activity in the area, and have been told by local gang members that the park will become “their” territory, once the state closes the park gates. Yet our on-site DPR staff members continue to persevere.

With the decreased hours, staffing, services, and resources, one can only imagine the effect on the public. Many visitors arrive at the park only to find the gates closed. Only a paper sign tells them of the park hours, if vandals have not torn it off. No permanent sign exists to tell park visitors of the park hours or to ensure them that the park is open...sometimes. So we hear from the public that they “thought the park was already closed.” Some visitors who call and receive no answer or come on a day when the park is closed, give up and never return.

Our tale shows the plight of many of the parks on the closure list. A long history of declining staff and services have led to declining attendance, which has in turn meant more declining resources—a vicious downward spiral one person has termed “the toilet bowl effect”—which has continued until this entire process was ironically used to justify our inclusion on the closure list. One can see why, when the list was released with our park’s name on it, we were not surprised.

While the Friends of Pio Pico has been trying to find ways to mitigate some of the issues at the park, it has been difficult to raise funds in these economically challenging times. Many donors are not interested in donating to “the state,” which they view as an evil entity that has mismanaged their tax dollars, nor are they interested in donating funds to the park which they fear the state will eventually close anyway. Multiple co-ops have noticed this: ironically, when a park appears on the closure list, the donations to that park go **down**, not up. If the park comes off the list, the donations go up in response. The current political climate has further added to this animosity. For the past several years, our organization has struggled with ways to help keep our park open.

In 2008, when the threat of park closures first began under then-Governor Schwarzenegger, the Friends of Pio Pico began discussions with governments of the local cities and county to form a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) to take on operations of the park. The partners were to be the cities of Whittier, Pico Rivera and Santa Fe Springs, and the county of Los Angeles, with the Friends of Pio Pico continuing to serve as the nonprofit arm and administrator of the

interpretive programs. The San Gabriel Valley Conservation Corps was also being considered as a partner to assist in park maintenance in conjunction with training opportunities for at-risk youth. Several meetings were held, and the Friends of Pio Pico drafted several proposals.

Unfortunately, not once, but three times, the park was added to a closure list and then removed, as then-Governor Schwarzenegger vowed not to close any state parks following enormous public outcry. The “dirty little secret” (that state parks could not discuss with the public), was that the budget cuts were still in place, resulting in extreme cuts to staff, hours and services across all state parks, including ours. The sad consequence of this three year rollercoaster was a false sense of security and public confidence that state parks would never close! It was a classic case of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” But on May 13, 2011, the wolf was real: the painful reality hit with the announcement of the final closure list (no longer “proposed”) of 70 state parks. I remember the day very well, as I stood before nearly 150 park advocates from various nonprofits at the annual CALPA Conference in Mendocino and made the announcement. First came the announcement that the list contained 70 parks, and then by midday, we read the list park by park to the horror of the participants there.

Over the last year, I have spent time traveling from park to park on that closure list, delivering signs, warning of the impending closure, to local groups that are trying to save their individual parks, or placing signs in front of parks with no champions defending them. The public reaction has been the same....the public didn't know their local park was closing, they were outraged, and often they thought that it was just another fire drill like the last three years. But we are all now painfully aware that this is NO drill – the wolf is real; these parks are closing if no steps are taken to save them. Unfortunately the last three years of false alarms has done great harm to our cause by creating a false sense of security. I have dubbed this the “Emergency Broadcast System Syndrome” as the public has ignored the warnings until very recently. It is truly a case of “crying wolf” far too many times before, and it has hindered our efforts to help our parks. Our placement of signs announcing the closure of each individual park has brought to light the stark reality, and many communities and organizations have rallied and are working on plans to save their respective parks from closure, but their plans are far from finalized, and only a few parks have received reprieve at this time, and then, only for a brief period (one to three years).

Several factors have prevented Pio Pico State Historic Park from being “saved” from closure. First, the partners in the proposed JPA decided that the operation of this historic park was beyond their current capability: mostly financially, but also from a liability standpoint. With cuts to their own budgets from the state funds, they have no extra resources to share, and are not interested in the added liability that operating the park brings, particularly with the high level of deferred maintenance at the park. There is great concern about the need to make large investments at the park over the next few years, only to be asked to return the park to DPR management and the possibility of closure sometime in the future. Secondly, even the possibility of the JPA partners donating funds to allow DPR staff to continue running the park is dubious. Cuts in redevelopment funds and other programs have left these cities making their own drastic cuts and experiencing layoffs. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, it has been a difficult task to convince these entities that this is no longer a “drill.” Indeed, DPR staff announced at our last board meeting that the closure process on our park has begun. Since this has never happened in the history of state parks, no one knows

exactly what that means, what is entailed in closing the park, and how long it will take. We are all learning during this tragic process.

Recently, we were informed that our park can be saved from closure if we are able to raise \$80,000 to cover the difference between caretaker status and the current level of operations at the park. This new information sent us back to the drawing board, and we recently launched the “Rescue Pio Pico” campaign to raise the funds. With sponsorships and several community events, we hope to raise most or all of the funds. And over the next few months, we hope to hear from our neighboring cities regarding the funds they can commit to the park, once their budget process is complete. But this will only save our park for one year at our current level of operations. While this is not the best we could hope for, as our current operating level is far from acceptable, it is something. And total closure of our park is our biggest fear, as vandalism and neglect will most certainly destroy the already struggling park.

Several factors make our park a prime example of a park that might be better managed on a local level. First, its proximity to the sector office is problematic. While this distance in other districts might not be an issue, in the middle of Los Angeles, the 18 miles can take 30 minutes or it can take several hours to traverse, depending on traffic. And each of our sector and district staff members drive between several parks in the Los Angeles area, making their commuting time very lengthy and their visits to our park short and infrequent. This is particularly important for rangers, who provide security for the park, and maintenance staff, who maintain the grounds and repair broken equipment. While Interpretive Staff can manage many of their functions electronically, rangers and maintenance workers cannot. This physical isolation also poses a problem with respect to security at the park, which is situated in an urban area with urban problems. Illegal drug sales just outside our park gates, tagging, vandalism, and unauthorized entry into the park are commonplace, and more frequent in recent months with the decrease in park hours and visible park staff. Any security issues at the park are responded to by local authorities, with park rangers coming to the park after the fact to complete the necessary reports. While proximity to resources and security are major factors, other local resources are also available to help with managing the park. These resources can be leveraged on a local level, but not while the park is being operated by DPR. Regulations, Union interests, and other factors prevent our park from utilizing resources and opportunities such as the local college’s law enforcement program students as park security volunteers, the local conservation corps’ at-risk youth as maintenance workers, etc. With local management of our park, some of these resources can be implemented. This is a model we have explored, but with the park closure only a few months away, and local governments lacking sufficient resources, we have opted to find funding to continue the management of the park by current DPR staff for now and explore other options in the future.

Critically important to the concept of local park management as an option or tool to save state parks facing closure, is the paramount necessity of these parks to remain within the California State Park System, rather than being transferred wholesale to local governments and other entities. I say critical, because it is our firm belief that the California State Park System should be revamped and retooled, but NOT torn apart. Its strength is in its size and diversity, despite the current economic need for other models of operation at this time. Remaining in the state park system gives individual parks access to state resources and designations not available to them otherwise. And the California State Park System as a whole, is truly one of California’s greatest assets, with a critical mission to serve present and future Californians.

When taken as an example, Pio Pico State Historic Park illustrates problems faced by the park system as a whole. Regulations that were drafted one or a few at a time, to address a situation at hand, now strangle effectiveness and prohibit critical thinking and problem solving in a time that requires both in large amounts. Solutions exist and can be implemented, but it requires the state to relinquish ineffective procedures and some control to partner organizations - partners that have been seen as ancillary and subordinate, but which should be given increased visibility and latitude to help revamp the state park system. Unfortunately, the system that has spawned the problems will not be able to fix them without some major changes in its paradigm. And it will require time, funding and flexibility to develop this new model of California State Parks.

What role can CALPA play in changing the California State Park System paradigm?

The California League of Park Associations (CALPA) views the current climate as an opportunity to revisit the current structure of California State Parks as a broader system. We believe, as an organization, that we have a unique vantage point for state parks, and possess much of the institutional knowledge of a system that has seen an incredibly high rate of turnover. But in order for this to occur, CALPA and co-ops in general, need to be seen as equal partners in the larger state park system.

CALPA currently has four methods of communicating and disseminating information to its members (and non-member cooperative associations) regarding state park issues:

- The CALPA website provides the latest information on park issues and links to organizations working with state parks and its partners.
- CALPA members are available throughout the state as mentors and information sources. Several CALPA board members provide training for DPR-led Partnership training courses.
- CALPA's quarterly newsletter sends current information out to co-ops, individual members, and our general mailing list.
- CALPA's annual conference is our flagship event, bringing together co-op members and DPR staff to hear about the latest trends and best practices happening throughout the state. Over the years, this conference has grown and evolved tremendously. It was at one of these conferences that I first joined CALPA, and I can, without reservation, attest to the incredible resources that the organization has in the form of its members and their knowledge and experience.

CALPA recently retooled our strategic plan and mission, in response to the current state parks crisis. A new focus is to help grow co-ops organizations with training, capacity building and mentoring. In addition to partnering new and emerging co-ops with well-established co-ops in specific areas, we are also working with DPR and the California State Parks Foundation (CSPF) on training opportunities.

CALPA faces familiar challenges: funding and staffing remain major areas of need. But our biggest hurdle for helping co-ops be more integral partners in the State Park System is one of perception and differing cultures. Ironically, as an anthropologist, I see the constant clash of cultures in very real ways, and more so in these times of crisis.

At a state park social event a few years ago, a state park employee referred to nonprofit cooperating associations as “organizations of old ladies...”. Thankfully we had a young, energetic board member at the event who humorously identified herself as one of those “old ladies” who just happened to run a nonprofit co-op with a \$750,000 annual budget that supported nine state parks. The audience laughed. While she was able to provide comic relief for the event, this situation brings to light the incredible misconception that nonprofit co-ops serving parks are ineffectual and insignificant booster groups who raise a few funds with bake sales. In fact, some state park staff proclaim this as the proper role for co-ops. However, today’s reality is far from this nostalgic scenario. In many cases today, these nonprofits are powerhouses with incredibly deep ties to the community and the ability to raise significant funds for specific projects.

One of the characteristics of nonprofit co-ops that is often ignored is the depth of experience and knowledge and the level of professionalism within our organizations. I would like use my two boards as prime examples of typical cooperating association boards across the state.

The Friends of Pio Pico board members’ professional experience include (either currently or recently retired): 2 directors of human resources, 1 benefits manager, 2 business owners, 1 director of a university student program, 1 union representative, 1 county grants manager, 2 community leaders, 1 museum director, 2 college instructors, etc. Our advisory board consists of representatives from several major corporations, representatives of local colleges and universities, the director of the local conservation corps, and all elected officials in our area (including the local city mayors, county supervisor, two state Assembly Members, a state Senator, and a Congresswoman).

The CALPA Board consists of 21 members with a variety of educational and professional backgrounds. They include 4 PhDs, 6 Masters, several BA/BS degrees, 7 executive directors of co-ops, 3 former executive directors of co-ops, 11 co-op board officers (5 of them presidents), a former VP of a national corporation, a VP of major nonprofit (paid staff), 2 published authors, 2 nonprofit consultants, 2 attorneys, several business owners, etc.

Neither of these groups could be categorized as organizations of old ladies running a bake sale (although an actual group of “old ladies” could also be a formidable force).

The main point here is the need for state park stakeholders to recognize the professional potential of these nonprofits, and provide them both the due respect they deserve and the opportunity to reach their full potential. In many cases, it appears that this potential is limited by the misperception of nonprofits and their capabilities. I again point to the incredible nonprofit success stories around the state, which often appear to be the exceptions rather than the rule, despite the fact that most of the co-op nonprofit boards have the same level of education, experience and professionalism that CALPA and the Friends of Pio Pico possess.

An extension of this need to recognize co-op potential is the need for consistency of the connection between co-ops and DPR. Inconsistent messaging and difficult relationships with park staff is a common theme for co-ops throughout the state. While some co-ops enjoy a very positive relationship with park staff, others experience animosity or difficulties, which prohibit the co-ops from maximizing their level of support for the parks they have pledged to help. This has been further exacerbated by the current economic crisis. In some cases, the culture of scarcity has caused individuals to become insular rather than cooperative.

Nonprofit partners, with creative ideas for revenue generation, have met with resistance and strict or narrow interpretations of regulations that have prevented new ideas from being considered, let alone implemented.

Another significant limitation we face is the changing perceptions of the park mission. Our most recent information indicates that parks are now being considered individually rather than as part of a sector or district, and that each park is going to be required to have a business plan of sorts. While the recognition that park operations have revenue and expense that must be managed thoughtfully and competently is long overdue, it alone is not really going to solve parks' problems. And I caution against the belief that all parks individually can be financially self-sufficient; they cannot. Case in point is a park like Pio Pico State Historic Park. It is unreasonable to expect an historic park in an impoverished community to be able to generate the type of revenue necessary to maintain the historic adobe and gardens. Certainly revenue generation within this park is possible, but charging user fees to the extent that would allow this park to be self-sufficient, would exclude the local community from being able to enjoy its benefits. The mission of state parks being available to all Californians would be lost.

One final area that challenges us, is the very bureaucratic structure in which we must function. No better example exists than the current situation of park closures. As previously mentioned, many organizations have stepped up to the plate and are working on plans to save their parks from closure. But only a few of these plans have been finalized as the agreement process has again been stymied by the bureaucratic process. Many organizations that have presented proposals to save their respective parks are met with the frustration of the painfully slow movement of the very system that has asked them to step up to the plate and help. We are only months away from the closure date. CALPA, as an organization, has been working tirelessly with other organizations to help many of the co-ops that are working on proposals. But our efforts are ineffectual unless the state is able to move these proposals through the system in time for organizations to be able to take on operations and administration of their respective parks before the closure date.

So where do we go from here?

CALPA and its co-op members propose several changes to the way that state parks operate and the paradigm in which they operate.

There is no one solution for the challenges that face the park system today. Local solutions will develop "organically" if there is more support for innovative approaches on the part of DPR staff. This means accepting operations of parks by DPR, a nonprofit, a concessionaire, local governments, or any configuration including any possible viable park partners working in collaboration. This shift from emphasis on procedures and regulations to emphasis on solutions and collaboration will be more easily accomplished if there is first, a review of the current State Parks Mission to make it more relevant to the current world we live in, and secondly, a renewed emphasis on state parks mission within the agency rather than a focus on strict interpretation of regulations.

We further recommend that the State of California and the DPR specifically, recognize that collaboration with nonprofit co-ops will enable the parks system to deliver on this mission in these times of challenge and diminished financial resources. We are not advocating for the

sole partnership with nonprofits (as we recognize that there are several important park partners who can assist). But we are asking for an increased level of partnership with nonprofits and a recognition (rather than a limitation) of their potential.

Accepting that the California State Park System is made up of important park partners that can and should vary in emphasis and importance on a case by case basis is an important notion that needs to be embraced. Focus should be on structuring the best model for a park or parks, rather than simply implementing regulation in a strict and limiting way and assuming a “one size fits all” model. This means that we all need to not only think outside the box, but also “get” outside the box.

We further advocate for the maintenance of the California State Park System by revamping it, not destroying it. A shift in paradigm, we believe, would bring everyone to the table to reintegrate a California State Parks System, not divide it. Regardless of the entity providing park operations and management, state parks should remain part of an integrated system.

And finally, although we agree that a business plan for each park is an excellent exercise in helping develop revenue generation and other forms of support for each park, the expectation of self-sufficiency for each park is unrealistic. While we recognize the public’s waning interest in funding stewardship entities like a state park system, a better marketing effort convincing the public of the incredible return on investment that their funding of state parks provides for them individually would alleviate some of the animosity the public feels toward state agencies. Whether this takes the form of a vehicle license fee or some other mechanism for sustainable funding, we hope that a mechanism can be found that will remove our state parks from a perpetual funding rollercoaster.

We applaud the efforts of DPR Director Ruth Coleman, in creating a visionary approach to the management of the California State Parks System. Her addition of a non-law enforcement career advancement track is commendable, and the messages coming from her office are truly inspiring and move in the direction that we believe California State Parks need to go. However, the change has been slow, and the messages have been met with resistance throughout the ranks. DPR has been a culture of enforcement rather than innovation, and our current economic situation requires innovation. There is still much work to be done to transform the nature of DPR and open people up to this new and ever-changing paradigm.

In developing our conference theme for this year, CALPA board members thought long and hard about the State Park System and decided to develop a visual model. We settled on viewing the California State Parks System as a magnificent sailing ship. For it to run smoothly, especially in uncharted waters (which we find ourselves in today), the responsible crew members must truly understand not only their ship—how it works and what it requires—they must understand something about the waters in which it moves. And most important of all: they cannot handle the entire ship alone, but with able bodied partners. CALPA and the co-ops of the California State Park System stand ready to be of service in this important voyage into uncharted waters, but to be successful, we must all be open to the new paradigm of California State Parks as a collaborative system with a variety of configurations based on the realities of each park and how it fits into the system.