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Commission Calls for New Vision to Restore State Parks to Excellence

California has been given a two-year window of opportunity to save a park system built over 85 years to global prominence. The alternative: Accept decline and a sharply curtailed vision for California parks in the future.

“For a generation the state has made repeated cuts to state park funding while offering the impression that the cuts would have little effect,” said Commissioner Virginia Ellis, who chaired the Commission’s state parks study. “The results are clear. A great public institution is falling apart. Without a bold, new course equal to the vision that created the state park system, California risks a replay of closing parks that the state can no longer afford to operate.”

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 operating model built around shared management, innovation, greater transparency and the expectation that it generate more revenue from its operations.

In a report released Monday, *Beyond Crisis: Recapturing Excellence in California’s State Park System*, the Little Hoover Commission called on the Governor and the Legislature to help the California Department of Parks and Recreation by giving the department the tools, authority and flexibility required to develop a new operating model. These include the basic accounting and financial analysis tools required to run an enterprise and the authority and flexibility to move talented professionals into the positions where they can do the most good. These tools should help enhance transparency and accountability.

The appointment of a new director and management team and their delivery this month of a strategic action plan mark encouraging positive steps in this process. It will be for them to develop a new vision of the park system to drive its mission, a vision that embraces innovation and extends the definition of the park system to include its partners.

Along with developing this new vision, the Commission recommends that the department, with the help of the State Park and Recreation Commission, undertake a public, top-to-bottom assessment of the parks in its collection to determine which have

clear statewide significance and which parks serve primarily local or regional populations. Those parks determined to serve primarily local or regional needs should be realigned. This analysis should look beyond parks, to include the system's cultural and historic assets as well.

The Commission identified several chronic conditions that threaten state parks with continued neglect, deterioration and a return to closures if not addressed:

- The Department of Parks and Recreation can't generate enough revenue on its own to replace continual reductions in taxpayer support.
- The current model of a highly centralized state-run park system is obsolete.
- The department's staffing structure is ossified.
- Bond borrowing has expanded the park system beyond the department's ability to staff and maintain it.
- Relationships have deteriorated with many of the park system's most important partners and supporters.

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. The Commission's recommendations are submitted to the Governor and the Legislature. For a copy of the report, visit the Commission's website, www.lhc.ca.gov.