



Draft Strategic Plan Public Comment Summary

Updated December 1, 2014

At the October 2014 meeting, the Parks Board approved the draft strategic plan for public comment. The Division solicited public comment for a 30 day period beginning on October 21 and ending on November 19. An email was sent to 2,762 recipients inviting public comment. A statewide public meeting was held on October 29, 2014 using teleconference equipment at the Helena headquarter and each of the FWP regional offices. Thirty-one people attended the meeting, in addition to three Parks Board members.

Media coverage about the public meeting and draft plan was also provided by the following newspapers:

- Billings Gazette – October 22, 2014
- Helena IR – October 25, 2014
- Bozeman Chronicle – October 27, 2014
- Missoulian Editorial – November 5, 2014
- Flathead Beacon – November 6, 2014
- Missoulian – November 12, 2014

In total, 63 public comments were submitted on the Montana State Parks Draft Strategic Plan for 2015-2020, titled *Crafting a New Tomorrow*. The breakdown of comments received is as follows:

- 49 comments from individuals
- 9 comments from organizations, user groups, and businesses
- 3 comments from agencies
- 1 comment from an elected official

All comments supported the creation of the draft strategic plan to varying degrees. Many had specific comments on the goals and targets, while others had comments on the process and format of the draft plan. A number of comments were directed at specific parks. The following is further discussion of the public comment themes identified.

Comments Relating to Goal A: Resources and Approaches (13 comments)

Many comments addressed the process of classifying state parks. Many comments supported the idea of classifying parks. Many expressed that all parks should remain public land. Some felt that divesting of lands that do not meet the mission or have statewide prominence would be good, while others felt that divesting of land could have profound impacts on local communities. One felt that this could be particularly true in less-populated areas like Eastern Montana. Some comments expressed the need to actually see more land acquired to protect important resources. Others felt the Division should focus most on protecting what is currently in the park system. A few comments felt that more description was needed on the process for classification, and urged the Division to have an open public process for establishing the criteria to determine which parks are significant. One comment felt that categorizing of goals and purposes of parks

would help in prioritizing parks. One comment suggested researching how other states are managing all sites, from flagship parks to lower priority parks.

One comment suggested including a discussion about return on investment, feeling that this would resonate with business interests that the Division is looking to engage. One comment felt that eastern parks should receive as much investment as western parks have seen over the years.

One comment requested more information on examples where past resources were inadequate for meeting operational and maintenance needs.

A few comments addressed the brand promise. One comment stated that the brand promise of accessible should mean that Montanans in the north central and northeastern areas of the state should have equal access to parks like the rest of the state. Another comment felt that the brand should additionally represent stewardship of resources.

One comment felt that Fishing Access Sites containing heritage properties should also be evaluated for potential significance to protect the cultural resources.

A few comments questioned the idea of more development, and felt that lower development and lower costs to operate parks would be better for the park system. A couple comments addressed primitive parks in particular, urging for them to remain primitive and to provide more of a vision for protecting their resources.

Comments Relating to Goal B: Fiscal Sustainability (29 comments)

The high number of comments received addressed funding of state parks. A majority of comments expressed support for sustainable funding of the park system. A few comments stated that the Legislature is not doing enough to fund state parks. One comment suggested the Legislature should help with funds for management of parks. A few comments requested more information on expenditures and funding needs to better understand where funds are being spent and how much funding the park system needs before requesting additional funds. One comment suggested bringing more collectable souvenirs into park stores to raise revenue.

Below is more discussion on specific methods of funding discussed in the comments.

Vehicle Registration Fee

Many comments expressed support for making the vehicle registration fee mandatory and permanent, and increasing it to \$10 a year. Some also felt that regular increases should be mandatory, for example increasing the fee \$1 every year for 10 years. Conversely, one comment felt that this fee was not an equitable way to fund parks and suggested other raising income taxes instead. A few comments felt that the current 77% participation rate for paying the fee was low, and suggested that increasing this participation could help with funding.

State General Fund

A few comments expressed support for using state general fund to support the park system. One expressed support for using the 3% bed tax and 2% rental car tax that goes to the general fund on state parks, but urged that the already dedicated 4% bed tax should not be used for facilities and only be put towards tourism purposes.

Park Fees

Many comments stated support for increasing park user fees. One comment felt that those who demand more services, like electricity and WiFi, should pay the full cost of the fees while others who do not desire those services should not subsidize those fees. One comment felt that seniors should be charged full price, as these users typically have more disposable income. One felt that more could be done to increase revenue on premium sites that are often booked up months in advance. One comment suggested that park fees need

to be priced at least 80% of KOA fee for comparable services. One comment stated that all users need to pay, regardless of what activity they do. Another comment felt that parks that support fishing access should receive fishing money.

One comment was received that felt park fees should not be increased, but instead focus should be on developing more classes and programming that users would pay for. Another comment felt that modest increase in fees and taxes would be acceptable.

Corporate Sponsors

Some comments received supported corporate sponsorship, while others were cautious about the idea. One comment felt that it would be possible for the Division to find a business sponsor for each of the 55 state parks. One suggested that private sponsors could be used to underwrite public programs in the parks, while another comment felt that the Division needs to establish criteria with public collaboration before pursuing sponsorship.

One comment did not support sponsorship at all, and another felt that effort should be given to reaching out to the Legislature and encouraging funding rather than corporate donors.

Foundation

A few comments addressed the idea of a foundation. The Montana Trails, Recreation & Parks Association supported a foundation or state trust fund being established for parks and recreation. The Montana Outdoor Legacy Foundation expressed willingness to help the Division meet its goal of raising \$4 million in private foundation monies. One comment felt that a charitable giving program could be better developed to facilitate taking in donations and private funds.

Taxes

A few comments specifically mentioned taxes. One comment suggested that resource extraction taxes on all non-renewable resources extraction—not just coal—could support the park system. One comment supported raising income taxes. Another comment supported an excise tax on non-consumptive uses, but did not support taking earnings from the lottery.

Statewide Friends Group

One comment stated that a statewide friends group would be beneficial, but cautioned that a statewide group cannot be funded by current friends groups, which focus on specific parks.

Comments Relating to Goal C: Services and Experiences (18 comments)

Many comments received addressed services and experiences. A few comments referenced programming opportunities, including tribal interpretation, expansion of AmeriCorps program and Junior Ranger program, and maintaining free programs for school groups. Some comments felt that better partnerships with communities and non-profits could help expand programming offerings. One comment suggested developing a Rails-to-Trails program.

Some comments expressed a desire to see additional facilities, while a few comments questioned the need for more development. One comment wanted to see more rental yurts. Bike Walk Montana suggested developing no-turn away bicycle camping. Comments received from the Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association, Capital Trail Riders Association, and Western Montana Trail Riders Association expressed a desire to see more opportunities for motorized recreation. Conversely, other comments urged the Division to not allow motorized recreation in state parks.

Some comments were critical of the Division's focus on more development, and called for a focus on low cost, less development, and fewer resources. Trout Unlimited questioned whether the plan reflects what Montanans want for their park system, and called for more mechanisms to track what the general public

wants, likes, or dislikes. Some comments questioned the balance between well developed parks and primitive parks, and called for more details on management of primitive parks. Trout Unlimited also called for more discussion for preserving wildlife values found in parks and questioned how the Division will co-manage hunting and fishing opportunities in state parks with other FWP Divisions.

One comment questioned if anyone has studied the implication of more visitors on the park experience, and how that will impact the individual visitor experience.

A few comments supported expanding opportunities for people of all accessibilities, while one comment felt the term 'accessible' was being used too vaguely, referring to both physical access and ADA standards.

Comments Relating to Goal D: Partnerships and Engagement (16 comments)

Comments were very supportive of increasing partnerships and engagement opportunities. Many comments felt that the Parks Board should encourage citizen involvement in park operations and maintenance. A few comments suggested working with schools for monitoring and maintenance of parks. The Montana Trails, Recreation & Parks Association suggested establishing a Parks and Recreation Advisory Team to develop consistent policies, interagency programs, and enhanced collaboration among all public parks and recreation providers and organizations.

A few comments felt the Division could better communicate the economic benefit of recreation. One comment suggested working more closely with the Land Board to raise awareness of these benefits.

Some comments felt that more strategic partnerships need to be developed with local communities, user groups, and non-profits for programming and on-going stewardship of parks. One comment suggested working more closely with Tribes and Tribal colleges to do interpretation and programming. A comment received from the National Park Service urged the Division to work with NPS on training, interpretive programs, development of business plans, and sharing of staff and equipment. One comment suggested tying the plan into the Main Street Program to connect with business owners. Comments received from Missoula County and Missoula Parks and Recreation spoke to the need for continued partnerships at all levels. The Montana Trails, Recreation & Parks Association urged the Division and Parks Board to continue to work with all cities and counties to enhance recreation statewide.

A couple of comments expressed the desire to see more recognition of volunteers as part of a successful operation. One comment cautioned that volunteers should supplement staff though, and not replace staff.

Comments Relating to Goal E: Awareness and Outreach (8 comments)

Some comments addressed awareness and outreach for the state park system, particularly among state and community policy makers. Some comments suggested stronger communication on the economic value of state parks. One comment encouraged the Division to more widely communicate the accomplishments and success stories of the recreation trails grant programs.

A few comments felt that more investment in marketing would help increase awareness. One comment from a business encouraged more advertisement in western Canada to attract Canadian visitors to state parks. Another comment stated that there should be more marketing of park amenities on the website.

One comment called for the development of a periodic opt-in email to keep users up-to-date, while another suggested expanding the availability of brochures so people do not have to rely on technology to access information.

Comments Relating to Process (4 comments)

Some comments received addressed the process. One comment felt that structured survey would be better for public comment. One comment requested a 30-day extension of the public comment period. One comment suggested that the draft plan should consider a longer time period than 5 years. One comment

thought that the draft plan did not provide an adequate summary of the listening sessions or how prominent their view was in developing the draft plan. The comment also felt that input from park staff and the Legislature had a certain level of bias, and that the plan could have been improved and more accurately reflected Montanans if additional opportunities were made for the public to weigh in.

Comments Relating to Format (9 comments)

Some comments addressed the overall format of the draft plan. Many felt that the draft was too long, too wordy, too bureaucratic, and had too much jargon. Some felt the goals were lost in the back of the draft plan. Some comments in particular felt that the draft plan lacked direction as to how the goals would be implemented, and suggested including measures and completion dates for each initiative presented. One comment felt the plan was more focused on patching holes and not on a strategic vision. A few returned fully edited copies of the draft plan for consideration.

Comments Relating to Specific Parks (15 comments)

Some comments were received that address park-specific topics. Many comments were received that urged the Division to keep Madison Buffalo Jump a state park or a state monument. One comment suggested relocating bison to the public land around the Lewis & Clark Caverns. One comment called for more improvements to recreation sites in Lincoln County. One comment urged for Fish Creek State Park be managed as a primitive park. One comment stated that Yellowstone River needs to be included on website. One comment urged for Marias River to remain walk-in only access.