

STATE PARKS, RECREATION AND TRAVEL COMMISSION
The Crescent Hotel, 75 Prospect Ave, Eureka Springs, AR 72632
3:30 p.m., October 22, 2020

Commissioners in Person

Kalene Griffith, Chair
Eric Jackson, Vice-Chair
Austin Albers
Jeff Baskin
Bob Connell
Mike Gibson
John Gill
Randy Wolfenbarger

Commissioners on Zoom

Molly Jackson
Blair Allen
Montine McNulty
Ness Sechrest
Jim Shamburger
Mike Wilson
Shash Goyal

Commissioners Absent

Ron Gossage
Weston Lewey

ADPHT Staff Present

Stacy Hurst, ADPHT Secretary
Jim Andrews, ADPHT General Counsel
Cynthia Dunlap, ADHPT, Chief Financial Officer
Leslie Fiskens, ADHPT Chief of Legislative Affairs
Caleb Osborne, Chief of Staff, ADPHT
Elaine Lienhart, ADPHT Executive Assistant
Travis Napper, Tourism Director
Kristine Puckett, Tourism Deputy Director
Leah DiPietro, Communications Manager, Tourism Division
Joy Barlogie, Research and Development Manager, Tourism Division
Jessica Ledbetter, Sales Manager, Tourism Division
Melissa Adams, Welcome Center Administrator, Tourism Division
Brandy Flowers, Research Project Analyst, Tourism Division
Leigha Jones, Research and Development Consultant, Tourism Division
Tammy Boyce, Tourism Director Assistant, Tourism Division
Grady Spann, Parks Director
Shea Lewis, Parks Deputy Director
Joe Jacobs, Marketing and Revenue Manager, Parks Division
Jeff King, Planning and Development Manager, Parks Division
LaJeana Carroll, Executive Assistant, Parks Division
Debra Fithen, Grants Manager, Heritage Division

Governor's Office

Chris Fletcher

CJRW/Miles

Daniel Czerwinski
Darin Gray
Chris Ho
Susie Kardas
Brian Kratkiewicz

Jennifer Morgan
Mark Raines
Sarah Van Doorn
Margaret Willis

Guests

Arkansas Public Broadcasters Association
Robert Berry, Eureka Springs Mayor
Richard Davies, ADPT Director Retired
Gary Jones, Gary Jones Video
Bill Ott, Crescent Hotel, Eureka Springs
Luke Story, Arkansas Broadcasters Association
Maryl Purvis, Van Buren Advertising & Promotion

Call to Order

Kalene Griffith called the meeting to order at 3:30 p.m.

Approval of the Agenda

Griffith asked for a motion to approval of the agenda.

Austin Albers moved to approve the agenda as presented. Eric Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Presentation of the Minutes from Previous Meeting

Mile Gibson moved to approve the September 17, 2020 minutes as presented. Jeff Baskin seconded, and the motion carried.

Welcome

Griffith welcomed Eureka Springs Mayor Robert Berry to the meeting. Mayor Berry thanked the commission for visiting and gave a brief overview of the 2020 Eureka Springs advertising update. Griffith thanked Mayor Berry and the staff of the Crescent Hotel for having the commission and staff as guests.

FINANCIAL REPORT – September 30, 2020

Cynthia Dunlap presented the FY 2021 Year-to-Date financial report for the three (3) month period ending September 30, 2020.

FY 2021 Year-to-Date Revenues were:

- Parks Division Operating Revenue - \$7,463,527 a decrease of -3.77%
- War Memorial Operating Revenue - \$156,633 a decrease of -69.59%
- 1/8% Tax Revenues - \$9,726,900 an increase of 10.06%
- 2% Gross Tax collections - \$3,978,158 a decrease of -26.85%

FY 2021 Year-to-Date Expenditures were:

- Department Total - \$26,945,020 a decrease of -11.57%
- Parks Division (including Construction and Grants) - \$20,919,793 a decrease of -14.97%
- Tourism Division - \$4,092,561 a decrease of -5.00%
- Keep Arkansas Beautiful - \$98,625 an increase of 22.55%
- Administration Division - \$1,528,450 an increase of 68.17%**
- War Memorial - \$305,591 a decrease of -46.60%

* Please Note: percentages (%) are in comparison to the same period in the prior fiscal year.

** Beginning in FY 2021, the Central Administration Division includes ADPHT Shared Services which represents the appropriation for positions that are identified as providing services to all divisions of the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism. Appropriation and funding are allocated to Shared Services, as applicable, from other Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism divisions.

John Gill moved to approve the financials as presented. Randy Wolfinbarger seconded, and the motion carried.

Secretary Report

Stacy Hurst reported on the approval for the \$50 million appropriation for the CARES Act funding for businesses that have been closed or restricted by the government due to COVID-19. Hurst thanked several staff members who worked very hard getting the grant approved. The next step will be working with partners to get the application process started for businesses to apply; the expected date to open the application is November 16 with a deadline of November 25. Hurst stated that the Department is working with CJRW to have the information available on Arkansasready.com.

Hurst thanked Cynthia Dunlap for her work on the budget and reported that it was approved at the Legislative Council.

Secretary Hurst stated that there continues to be challenges with COVID-19 and asked that everyone remain vigilant as a team and as a Department as the numbers continue to rise.

Hurst introduced Leslie Fisker to give a report on three pieces of legislation that will go before the Governor's Office and asked that the commission review the legislation before the November Commission meeting where a letter of support will be drafted and signed ahead of the legislative session. Fisker reported that the three pieces of legislation to be reviewed involve dynamic market-based pricing in individual state parks so they can be more competitive in the market, modifying construction design requirements within state parks that would result in increasing the financial threshold on certain projects, and making the Great River Road a section within the Tourism Division. Discussion ensued.

Advertising Committee

Austin Albers reported on the advertising committee meeting that was held that afternoon. The staff is working on a plan to distribute the large number of Travel Guides that are currently at the warehouse, due to COVID-19. CJRW shared the 2021 spring/summer media mix recommendations.

Tourism Report

Travis Napper reported that 11 staff are back in the office. Kristine Puckett is working with State Parks and Cynthia Dunlap on providing protective barriers for staff that are in cubicles. Napper has visited an additional five state parks and several more cities around the state.

Napper gave an update on the Smith Travel Research data. Revenues have flattened and are not quite the trend that the department wants to see, but the negative numbers are not in a place to be concerned about yet.

Napper updated the Commission on where the Division is in the process of the economic development grant. It is scheduled for review and there should be a decision in the next week.

Napper spoke at the Hope Rotary club, visited Central High, and is participating with Joy Barlogie in a Central Arkansas COVID-19 Economic Recovery Task Force.

Communications has four new stories to submit on Arkansas Ready for Travel. The 2021 Travel Guide is in the process of being proofed, the 2021 Cycling Guide has been proofed, and the section will continue to send out fall color updates.

Research and Development visited with the new person who has taken charge of reorganizing Arkansas' South, which is in the process of getting its non-profit status reinstated. Governor's Conference 2021 planning is in full swing; the staff is planning a hybrid event. Destination Think is a new research study that the Division will be utilizing. It is an organic consumer sentiment-based index that consolidates real time peer-to-peer comments that are being shared about Arkansas; it can go back over a year to compare/benchmark Arkansas consumer index against five chosen states. Transparent is another research study that will be used to report on lodging data and is similar to Smith Travel Research. Tableau will be a new spreadsheet used to give a better visual when reporting data across the board.

Sales is conducting a statewide familiarization tour of sports and meetings facilities. They have currently visited facilities in North Little Rock and Jonesboro. The Arkansas Group Travel Planner, which is an insert in the Leisure Group Travel Planner, is available now. Jessica Ledbetter and Shelby Morris have participated in a couple of virtual booths and through Teams and will be part of Brand USA Travel Week Booth.

Napper congratulated Melissa Adams on her promotion from Texarkana Welcome Center manager to the position of administrator for the Welcome Center Section. Wade Taylor was hired as the new welcome center manager at Corning.

Napper reported on the changes in employment in the hospitality industry since January 2020. Employment is down overall in Arkansas 12.1% and leisure and hospitality is down 14.9%. Small business revenue in the state was down 16.7% and leisure and hospitality is down 40.2%.

CJRW

Susie Kardas reported on the conversion breakdown for month-over-month from August to September. Total users saw a 5% decrease, while partner referrals had a 6% decrease. Guides ordered had an 8% decrease and guides viewed online saw a 4% decrease. Newsletter subscriptions were up by 1%. Year-over-year total users saw a 38% increase. Partner referrals had a 32% increase. Guides ordered saw no change. Guides viewed online saw a 14% decrease, while newsletter subscriptions saw a 36% decrease. Total traffic and conversion rate seem to be trending up and the partner referrals are up.

Chris Ho went over the search engine marketing performance for year-over-year. Clicks in 2020 saw a 40.9% increase. Conversions had a 53.9% increase. The conversion rate from 2019 to 2020 had a 9.2% increase and the spend was a 17.5% decrease from \$30.4K to \$24.9K. Bing had a 24% decrease in clicks from 2019 to 2020. The conversions decreased by 1.8% and the conversion rate was up by 13.7%. The spend was increased by 20.3%. Google saw an 18.7% increase in clicks, a 27.6% increase in conversions with a 7.5% increase in conversion rate. The spend was decreased by 8.1%. Facebook and Instagram ads served for August 2020 were 1.95 million at a cost of \$6.41 per 1,000 ads. There were 520,824 people reached at a cost of \$24 per 1,000 people. There were 650 guides requested.

Kardas gave an update on the Arkansas.com COVID-19 impact. Overall, the industry is up 12%. Year-over-year is up around 38%. There is phenomenal work being done by the travel writers and working on how to get more partner referrals to the site. Accommodations for the entire year are down about 65% except for the month of September, which is down around 55%. Restaurants are still fairing pretty well, and the biggest exception was in September when people were going out for Labor Day and back to school shopping. Overall, restaurants are down about 48% for the year. People are spending about 1 min 49 seconds on the website. Organic search is up thanks to travel writer content. Discussion ensued.

Commission meeting recessed at 4:15 p.m.

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**State Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission
Via Zoom or in-person for Commissioners & Key Staff
Via Zoom for Public
The Crescent Hotel, 75 Prospect Ave, Eureka Springs, AR 72632
8:30 a.m., October 23, 2020**

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Eric Jackson, Vice-Chair

Austin Albers

Jeff Baskin

Bob Connell

Mike Gibson

John Gill

Molly Jackson

Randy Wolfinbarger

Commissioners on Zoom

Shash Goyal

Molly Jackson-Houseworth

Montine McNulty

Jim Shamburger

Mike Wilson

Commissioners Absent

Blair Allen
Ron Gossage
Shash Goyal
Weston Lewey
Ness Sechrest

Department Staff

Stacy Hurst, Secretary Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism
Jim Andrews, ADPHT General Counsel
Cynthia Dunlap, ADPHT Chief Fiscal Officer
Caleb Osborne, ADPHT Chief of Staff
Elaine Lienhart, ADPHT Executive Assistant
Travis Napper, Tourism Director
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Leigha Jones, Arkansas Tourism Development Consultant
Grady Spann, Director, Arkansas State Parks
Shea Lewis, Deputy Director, Arkansas State Parks
Joe Jacobs, Marketing and Revenue Manager, Parks Division
Jeff King, Special Projects Manager, Parks Division
LaJeana Carroll, Executive Assistant, Parks Division
Debra Fithen, Division of Heritage

CJRW

Darin Gray
Jennifer Morgan
Keegan Wright
Mark Rains

Miles Media

Susie Kardas
Daniel Czerwinski

Guests

Chris Fletcher, Governor's Liaison
Gary Jones, Jones Video
Bill Ott, Crescent Hotel, Eureka Springs
Arkansas PBS

Chair Kalene Griffith called the meeting to order at 8:38 a.m.

Parks Committee Report

Commissioner Eric Jackson reported that the Parks Committee met on October 22, 2020. At a time when many tourism businesses are suffering, Arkansas State Parks (ASP) has exceeded previous records with over 5,000,000 visitors since the pandemic began in March of 2020. Camping occupancy and revenues continue to break previous records and the lodge occupancy and revenues are recovering. The new Monument Trails at Pinnacle Mountain State Park have reported 265 riders a day. ASP has concerns as fall heads into winter and the number of COVID cases in Arkansas is not declining. The ASP high level financial overview, if you recall after the first 4 months of the year, ASP revenues were behind last year's revenues due to COVID-19 park closures; however, due to the incredible amount of business ASP has experienced since the parks reopened, they have cut the deficit in half in the last four months. ASP has faced a staffing challenge due to a hiring freeze which caused many of the parks to be short-handed during the time of record-breaking visitation. With the lifting of the state agency hiring freeze, ASP has seen many internal promotions that are great for the agency, but this does not improve the staffing deficit. The capital projects and major maintenance reports included an update of the Petit Jean State Park Cedar Creek bridge repair which will be quite tough with the materials and bridge having to be hiked in the last quarter of a mile. Petit Jean State Park's new Visitor Center is almost ready to open for camping registrations with the exhibit installation in November and December. The report on interpretation programs shows the COVID-19 pandemic was hard on the Program Services section. The Digital Discovery online materials have helped to provide engaging content for visitors and the parks hope to get back to hands on interpretation sometime in the future. The Emergency Services law enforcement update has reported more incidents than a year ago due to increased visitation; these included the reporting of five deaths in the parks and the capture of a wanted fugitive. The State Parks' Website has also reported an increase in visitation.

Parks Director's Report

Grady Spann stated a copy of the newspaper and magazine articles and other types of media for September were included in the box for the Commissioners; the parks are still being covered frequently. People are rediscovering the state parks system and are essential to ASP visitors. Spann reported Jeff King was selected as the new Planning Development Manager and Spann stated he was excited to have Jeff as part of the core management team.

Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area – easement for Benton County Water District #5

Jeff King reported Arkansas State Parks has received a request from Jeremy Rawn, Project Engineer for Engineering Services, Inc. (ESI) for an easement agreement through a portion of Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area on behalf of Benton County Water Authority No. 5. Benton County Water Authority No. 5 is requesting a permanent fifteen (15) foot wide utility right-of-way for the construction, operation, and maintenance of a proposed 6-inch water line. The rights conferred will allow the Authority to enter upon said property for the purpose of construction, maintenance, and repair of the water transmission line.

The proposed easement will follow Rambo Road for 1,528 feet (see enclosed map). The easement will not impact the park's long-range development plan or current recreation use.

The easement is necessary for the small Rambo Water District to tie their water system into Benton County Water Authority No. 5 through a Community Development Block grant by Arkansas Economic Development Commission, due to contaminants in Rambo's water supply, such as cyanide.

Jim Shamburger made a motion to approve the lease agreement with Engineering Services, Inc. as follows:

A Twenty (20) Foot wide construction easement reverting to a Fifteen (15) Foot wide post-construction permanent easement with said water line as the centerline lying on the South side of Rambo Road in part of Southwest Quarter of the Northeast Quarter (SW1/4, NE1/4), Section 24, Township 19 North, Range 28, West of the fifth Principal Meridian in Benton County, Arkansas. (Deed ref# 538-350), for the utility right-of-way for the construction, operation, and maintenance of a proposed 6-inch water line.

Montine McNulty seconded, and the motion carried.

CIP Quarterly Report FY21 1st quarter

Jeff King reported at the end of September 2020, Arkansas State Parks maintains 21 open MOFs for design, construction, and property acquisition efforts of the CIP, with approximately \$62 million of prior encumbered funds, over \$21 million of funds spent in open MOFs, and an available open MOF balance of approximately \$22.8 million. The State Parks Division is currently funding or has previously committed funding in open MOFs for 143 projects of various size and scope. Beginning in July 2020 and through the end of the 1st Quarter of Fiscal Year 2021, six MOFs have been closed, totaling \$18,327,547. Since passage of Amendment 75, Arkansas State Parks has utilized over \$188.8 million to complete system-wide improvements with our apportionment of the 1/8th Cent Conservation revenue. Discussion followed.

Jeff King presented an update of several recently completed projects. Completed upgrades at White Oak State Park replacement bathhouse and equipment shed on September 18, 2020. Completed the construction of three new camper cabins at Devil's Den State Park. Recently completed a new Monument Trail at Pinnacle Mountain State Park funded by the Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation (APRF) opened on September 24, 2020. The DeGray Lake Resort State Park DeRoche Ridge campground will have a soft opening on October 28th followed by a full opening on November 1, 2020. The Louisiana Purchase State Park installation of a vault restroom and raising of the monument. ASP is coordinating this effort with the Arkansas state surveyor who will place a historic plaque at the precise location. A replacement maintenance complex at Lake Dardanelle State Park and regional complex with a scheduled completion date in late December 2020. The Mississippi River State Park Storm Creek Campground installation of a prefab bathhouse, campground renovations and upgrades, and the construction of the five new camper cabins with a scheduled completion date in February 2021. Discussion ensued.

CJRW / Miles

Daniel Czerwinski reported the Arkansas State Parks' website September 2019 to September 2020 comparison had a 138% increase in website traffic, a 96% increase in booking, 1,326 guides ordered an increase of 395%; this was not measured last year. There was a 17% increase in the number of times the state park guide was viewed online, and a 51% increase in the Arkansas.com referrals. From August 2020 to September 2020 a conversion breakdown showed a 46% increase in website traffic, 11% increase in booking site clicks, 6% decrease in the number of guides ordered, 32% increase in guides viewed online, and a 12% increase in Arkansas.com referrals. Czerwinski reported a massive increase in overall website users with the total traffic and booking conversion rates for the year from January 2020 with 175,000 to September 2020 with almost 450,000 showing strong improvements.

Danny Czerwinski reported on the user location breakdown January to September 2019 was 23% in state and 77% out of state when compared to January to September 2020 was 25% in state and 75% out of state there was not much of a change. The state with the highest website visits was Texas followed by

Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida. The website traffic from organic searches showed an incline from May to September 2020, in correlation with the park facilities reopening following the COVID-19 closures and loosened restrictions in the parks. The highest peaks for 2019 correlates with a significant diamond find at Crater of Diamonds State Park and a high peak in late September 2020 following a 9-carat diamond find announcement. The views on the park's accommodation pages continue to be consistent and correlates with the increased website traffic analytics showing the continual upward trajectory in the number of views on the accommodation pages. The event page views with the COVID-19 restrictions continue to show a decrease in the number of page views when compared to 2019, there seems to be a slight uptick as we head into the holidays as visitors are looking for regularly planned seasonal events. The views on the Event Pages will probably continue to lag behind 2019 until the COVID-19 restrictions on events and programs are lifted. The new Digital Discovery webpage has helped to take up some of the slack from the events page and has either made up or exceeded the lost traffic from March to September shows 23,912 Digital Discovery page views with an average stay time of 3 minutes and 17 seconds shows visitors are still interested in state parks and the park team has created engaging content. Discussion ensued.

New Business/Old Business/Other Business

Commissioner John Gill asked that the minutes recognize The Keep Arkansas Beautiful Commission's children's book, *Otto the Otter and the Great Arkansas Mystery*.

Commissioner Bob Connell requested the Commission recognize Keep Arkansas Beautiful's Executive Director Mark Camp for his work with the *Otto the Otter and the Great Arkansas Mystery* children's book and Otto the Otter mascot created to educate Arkansas youth about the importance of the environment to prevent littering and increase awareness of the Arkansas beautification efforts. Discussion followed.

Commissioner Austin Albers stated the October SPRTC meeting typically includes selecting a committee to nominate officers for the next year. Discussion followed.

Austin Albers made a motion to keep the current slate of 2020 officers for 2021, Kaleen Griffith as Chair and Eric Jackson as Vice-Chair. Mike Gibson seconded; John Gill opposed. Motion carried.

Commissioner Jeff Baskin asked if there had been any discussion regarding an official state park app? Grady Spann stated in the past ASP had an app. Joe Jacobs stated the app had been very trail based and the company who created it was unable to keep it updated and it was cost prohibitive. Jacobs stated ASP is looking at other options at this time as the app will require GIS access to the public. Chair Kalene Griffith stated a mobile friendly website is more important than an official app. Discussion ensued.

Commissioner Jeff Baskin asked about additional information for the Arkansas Legislative agendas and topics. Secretary Hurst remarked ADPHT will provide additional information for the SPRTC at the November Commission Meeting. ADPHT will have to draft legislation and work with the legislators and request an endorsement from the SPRTC next month.

Commissioner Eric Jackson stated this meeting in Eureka Springs emphasizes the importance of getting the SPRTC out in the field to meet with communities and community leaders.

Austin Albers moved to adjourn at 9:28 a.m. Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.

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