

State Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission
Via Zoom or in-person for Commissioners & Key Staff
1100 North St., Little Rock
Via Zoom for Public
10 a.m., February 25, 2020
Approved April 22, 2021

Commissioners Present

Kalene Griffith, Chair	John Gill
Eric Jackson, Vice-Chair	Ron Gossage
Blair Allen	Molly Houseworth
Jeff Baskin	Jim Shamburger
Bob Connell	Mike Wilson
Austin Albers (zoom)	Mike Gibson (zoom)
Randy Wolfenbarger (zoom)	

Commissioners Absent

Shash Goyal	Montine McNulty
Weston Lewey	Ness Sechrest

Department Staff Present

Stacy Hurst, Secretary Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism
Jim Andrews, ADPHT General Counsel
Leslie Fiskens, ADPHT Chief of Policy and Legislative Affairs
Cynthia Dunlap, ADPHT Chief Fiscal Officer
Caleb Osborne, ADPHT Chief of Staff
Elaine Lienhart, ADPHT Executive Assistant
Travis Napper, Tourism Director
Kristine Puckett, Deputy Tourism Director
Tammy Boyce, Tourism Director Assistant, Tourism Division
Joy Barlogie, Tourism Research and Development Manager
Theresa Helliwell, Agency Controller
Leah DiPietro, Communications Manager
Melissa Adams, Welcome Center Administrator
Bridget McLemore, Tourism Administrative Assistant
Grady Spann, Director, Arkansas State Parks
Shea Lewis, Deputy Director, Arkansas State Parks
Joe Jacobs, Marketing and Revenue Manager, Parks Division
Jeff King, Project Manager, Parks Division
Lajean Carroll, Executive Assistant, Parks Division

CJRW

Darin Gray	Chris Ho
Jennifer Morgan	Brian Kratkiewicz

Miles Media

Susie Kardas
Ileana Frascone
Daniel Czerwinski

Guests

Jack Moyer, Crescent Hotel
Suzanne Grobmyer, Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation
Gary Jones, Jones Video
Marty Ryall, Arkansas PBS
Luke Story, Arkansas Broadcasters Association
Brian Clark, Inuvo

Chair Kalene Griffith called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. Elaine Lienhart called the roll.

Welcome

Kalene Griffith welcomed Commissioners and all participants to the Zoom/conference call to the State Parks Recreation and Travel Commission (SPRTC) meeting. Griffith recognized Commissioner Houseworth attending her first SPRTC meeting in-person.

Approval of Agenda

Mike Wilson moved to approve the Agenda as presented. Jim Shamburger seconded, and the motion carried.

Presentation of Minutes from January Meeting

John Gill moved to approve the Minutes, as amended from the January 28, 2021, meeting. Eric Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Presentation of Minutes from February 16, 2021, Meeting

John Gill moved to approve the Minutes, as amended from the February 16, 2021, meeting. Randy Wolfenbarger seconded, and the motion carried.

FINANCIAL REPORT

Jim Shamburger moved to approve the January 2021 Financial Report as presented. Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.

Secretary's Report

Petit Jean State Park Visitor Center Naming

Stacy Hurst reported that Governor Hutchinson is supportive of naming the Petit Jean visitors center for Dr. T. W. Hardison. The dedication will be April 22, after the State Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission meeting.

Legislative Report

Leslie Fisker reported on three main pieces of legislation. The department is trying to become less reliant on general revenue funds. The final draft language has been approved for dynamic market-based pricing for Arkansas State Parks (ASP); Senator Jonathan Dismang is sponsoring this Senate Bill. Senator Missy Irvin is sponsoring Senate Bill 350, an act to modify construction design requirements for ASP and increase the threshold to \$75,000 for the bidding process. Senator Caldwell has sponsored Senate Bill 305 to increase the threshold for the bidding process for all state agencies to \$50,000. The third item of legislation is sponsored by Senator Missy Irvin; Senate Bill 313 is a structural move to eliminate the Great River Road Commission and merge that program with Arkansas Tourism. Fisker informed the commission where the bills can be viewed online. Discussion ensued.

Attorney's Report

Jim Andrews reported his office continues to review State Park and Tourism Division's contracts and agreements and working together to make it a more efficient process. The documents presented at each SPRTC meeting have been reviewed by his office before submittal.

Andrews stated the Queen Wilhelmina State Park (QWSP) cell tower agreement was approved in 2020 and according to AT&T the QWSP cell tower location is in the build plan for 2021.

Andrews reported two claims were filed against ASP. One claim was from Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park where a visitor had broken her ankle at a festival hosted by the Lions Club. As part of their concession agreement, the Lions Club will be responsible for the defense. Andrews reported a second claim was filed at Crater of Diamonds State Park where a visitor to the Diamond Search Area had stepped in a hole and broke her ankle; this claim is very defensible.

Secretary Hurst reported she met with Grady Spann and other ASP staff, Division of Information Systems (DIS), and Management Information Systems (MIS) and made connectivity in the state parks a priority. Secretary Hurst stated ADPHT is seeking grant opportunities through Arkansas Economic Development Commission (ADEC) or Cares Act funding for state park internet connectivity. Secretary Hurst will invite Eric Walker to the next meeting to report on the progress that has been made. Discussion ensued.

Parks Director

Kiwanis Club second amendment Lake Fort Smith State Park

Grady Spann reported the Kiwanis Club of Fort Smith requested renewal for the existing lease at Lake Fort Smith State Park. It is Kiwanis Club of Fort Smith's desire to extend the current lease agreement for an additional five years, as per previous lease extensions, and amend the camp use dates to the final two weeks in July with move-in permitted the Friday preceding the camp weeks. The current lease agreement and first extension with the Kiwanis Club of Fort Smith at Lake Fort Smith State Park will expire on March 1, 2021. Spann requested approval of the lease renewal of five years and amended camp use dates. Discussion ensued.

Ron Gossage moved to approve the lease agreement terms and amended camp use dates with Arkansas State Parks and Kiwanis Club of Fort Smith, Lake Fort Smith State Park for a period of five years. Molly Houseworth seconded, and the motion carried.

Miniature Railroad, Gift Shop/Snack Bar & Miniature Golf Queen Wilhelmina State Park

Grady Spann reported Ronnie Waggoner requested renewal for the existing Mountain Glory miniature railroad gift shop/snack bar, and miniature golf concession agreement at Queen Wilhelmina State Park. The State Park, Recreation and Travel Commission requested the agreement be renegotiated to a one-year term at the January 28, 2021, meeting. Mr. Waggoner has agreed to the amended terms and Spann requested approval of a one-year concessionaire license agreement. Discussion ensued.

Jim Shamburger moved to approve the concessionaire license agreement with Arkansas State Parks and Ronnie Waggoner, Queen Wilhelmina State Park for a period of one year. Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.

Bull Shoals-White River State Park– Bench and Memorial Plaque Donation

Jeff King reported Arkansas State Parks (ASP) has a memorial bench and plaque donation request necessitating SPRTC approval at Bull Shoals-White River State Park (BSWRSP). Mrs. Marylin Stenbeck, sister-in-law of Mrs. Kathy Lueck, would like to donate a memorial bench to BSWRSP in Mrs. Lueck's memory. The bench is proposed to be located in the Big Spring area of the park on the bank of the White River.

Mrs. Stenbeck noted in her request that Mrs. Lueck frequently organized family reunions at the pavilion near Big Spring. Mrs. Lueck would tell her family members that the Big Spring area meant so much to her and that overlooking the river was a place of peace for her. Mrs. Stenbeck has agreed to pay for the bench and all materials required for installation which will be undertaken by park staff. Exact verbiage for the proposed bench plaque: *"A Place of Peace" In Loving Memory of Kathy Lueck "Never Forgotten."*

Arkansas State Parks is seeking permission from the State Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission to accept this donation and install the memorial bench and plaque. Discussion ensued.

John Gill moved to approve the memorial bench and plaque as follows: Bull Shoals-White River State Park Memorial Bench and Plaque; plaque to read, “A Place of Peace” In Loving Memory of Kathy Lueck “Never Forgotten.” Eric Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Bull Shoals-White River State Park– Bench and Memorial Plaque Donation

Jeff King reported Arkansas State Parks (ASP) has a memorial bench and plaque donation request necessitating SPRTC approval at Bull Shoals-White River State Park (BSWRSP). Mrs. Chris Kaeding, the wife of Mr. Jerry Lee Kaeding, who was a frequent visitor to Bull Shoals-White River State Park, has requested she be able to place a memorial bench in the park in her husband’s honor on Big Bluff Trail.

The Kaedings moved to the Bull Shoals area in 2008. Mr. Kaeding was well known for his volunteer work within the Bull Shoals community, particularly when he and his wife would decorate the signs that welcome visitors to the city of Bull Shoals. He was a veteran of the United States Air Force and served in the Vietnam War. Mrs. Kaeding is a frequent visitor to Bull Shoals and often hikes the Big Bluff Trail. The bench at the top of the trail is older and she would like to replace it with a new bench in memory of her husband. The family has agreed to provide a donation covering all costs associated with the bench purchase and installation. The park’s maintenance staff will install the bench. Exact verbiage for the proposed bench plaque: *“Have a seat and rest your feet. Take in the sights. You might even see an eagle in flight. In memory of Grandpa JK.”*

Arkansas State Parks is seeking permission from the State Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission to accept this donation and install the memorial bench and plaque. Discussion ensued.

John Gill moved to approve the memorial bench and plaque as follows: Bull Shoals-White River State Park Memorial Bench and Plaque; plaque to read, “Have a seat and rest your feet. Take in the sights. You might even see an eagle in flight. In memory of Grandpa JK.” Mike Wilson seconded, and the motion carried.

Devil’s Den State Park-Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation Memorandum of Agreement

King stated through Memorandum of Agreement with Arkansas State Parks, The Arkansas Parks & Recreation Foundation (APRF), and the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism-State Parks Division, for design and construction of a parking lot that will hold at least forty (40) cars, a restroom with changing stalls, at least eight (8) Civilian Conservation Corps (“CCC”) inspired campsites and a CCC-inspired flyover bridge at the Yellow Rock Trail Intersection at Devil’s Den State Park. King asked the State Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission, at its discretion, to approve this Memorandum of Agreement with the APRF to improve the state Devil’s Den State Park trail amenities. Discussion ensued.

Eric Jackson moved to approve the Memorandum of Agreement with Arkansas State Parks and the Arkansas Parks & Recreation Foundation for the Devil's Den State Park trail amenities project. Randy Wolfinbarger seconded, and the motion carried.

ANCRC FY22 Grant Application

King presented the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council (ANCRC) - FY22 Proposed Projects Grant Request. The ANCRC was established by the Arkansas Legislature in 1987 to manage and supervise a grant and trust fund for the acquisition, management, and stewardship of state-owned properties acquired or used for ANCRC approved purposes. The grants are funded by the state's real estate transfer tax. Last funding cycle (FY21) the council awarded \$27,387,789.27 in grant dollars to twenty-three (23) different applicants. The Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism, Division of State Parks, requested \$10,678,708 in grant funds and received an award of \$9,000,000 for various State Park improvements.

This year's request contains twenty (20) projects totaling \$12,026,258 in proposed funding. Included are twelve (12) repair, renovation, or replacement projects; seven (7) new developments; and one (1) property acquisition. The request contains a mix of new and previously reviewed projects. Some requests are a continuation of projects for which the design phase was funded by previous ANCRC grants or Amendment 75 funds. Discussion ensued.

Jim Shamburger moved to approve the Fiscal Year 2022 Arkansas Natural & Cultural Resources Council grant request as presented, totaling \$12,026,258 in projects for Arkansas State Parks. Eric Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Cossatot River State Park-Natural Area structure removal

King requested permission to remove one structure from Cossatot River State Park-Natural Area's inventory. Brushy Creek West Vault Toilet (Building No. 10.02 /AASIS Nos. 120005569) is a 78 square-foot vault toilet structure with solar power and no HVAC or electricity that was constructed in 1990 as a restroom to the Brushy Creek trailhead. Cracks in the holding tank have caused the settling of the structure walls. These cracks have made the toilet unsafe and unusable. The building will be replaced by a new restroom facility. The building will be demolished and disposed of in accordance with all Federal, State, and local regulations.

Bob Connell moved to approve based on the information presented; the commission finds the following structures at Cossatot River State Park-Natural Area Brushy Creek West Vault Toilet (Building No. 10.02 /AASIS Nos. 120005569) is obsolete notwithstanding the insured value and approves the removal from Arkansas State Park inventory. Jeff Baskin seconded, and the motion carried.

Petit Jean State Park structure removal

King requested permission to remove one structure from Petit Jean State Park's inventory. Area B Bathhouse (**Building No. 41.16 /AASIS Nos. 120006309**) is a 672 square-foot building with wood frame construction, concrete foundation, and a shingled roof that was constructed in 1972 as a bathhouse for the campground. Construction for the campground renovations and the new bathhouse will begin in April and removal of structure will be part of the contractor's responsibilities.

Bob Connell moved to approve based on the information presented; the commission finds the following structure at Petit Jean State Park the Area B Bathhouse (Building No. 41.16 /AASIS Nos. 120006309) obsolete notwithstanding the insured value and approves the removal from Arkansas State Park inventory. Mike Wilson seconded, and the motion carried.

Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation Memorandum of Agreement

Grady Spann stated through Memorandum of Agreement with Arkansas State Parks, The Arkansas Parks & Recreation Foundation (APRF) and the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism-State Parks Division, installation, acceptance, display, and ownership of the artwork, based on the mission of the Park and with an eye towards the potential natural, cultural and/or historic context of Pinnacle Mountain State Park. Discussion ensued.

Susan Grobmyer remarked one of the overarching goals for the Monument Trails is for the trails to be multifaceted and multidisciplinary in their approach. The Monument Trails have attracted mountain bikers, hikers, and trail runners. This will be another beacon to attract a new group of visitors to the Monument Trails and the parks. The public artwork will add diversity to the parks attracting a new group of park users who may not have discovered state parks and Monument Trails. Discussion followed.

Spann asked the State Parks, Recreation and Travel Commission, at its discretion, to approve this Memorandum of Agreement with the APRF for the public purpose artwork gift at Pinnacle Mountain State Park. Discussion ensued.

John Gill moved to add an Arkansas Arts Council representative on the Art Committee. Bob Connell seconded, Vote was 2-11 against and the motion failed.

Mike Gibson moved to approve the Memorandum of Agreement with Arkansas State Parks and the Arkansas Parks & Recreation Foundation for the Pinnacle Mountain State Park public artwork gift. Eric Jackson seconded, Vote was 11-2 against, and the motion carried.

Grady Spann commented he attended the recent Arkansas Recreation Vehicle (RV) Show in Little Rock and with speaking to the vendors found that entry level RVs have increased 1,000% over last year and RV purchases as a whole have increased 20%. Spann remarked he anticipates ASP will see a very busy camping season.

CJRW / Miles

Danny Czerwinski reported the Arkansas State Parks' website is starting 2021 with very strong increases. January 2020 to January 2021 yearly comparison had a 19% increase in website traffic, a 44% increase in booking site clicks, 1,126 guides ordered which was a 331% increase. There was a 139% increase in the number of times the state park guide was viewed online, the increases in guides ordered and viewed online shows an intent to travel from our visitors. There was a 10% decrease in the Arkansas.com referrals, but this is not a cause for concern but something to watch. Comparing December 2020 to January 2021 the conversion breakdown shows great increases with a 36% increase in website traffic, a 53% increase in booking site clicks, a 93% increase in the number of guides ordered, a 98% increase in guides viewed online, and a 61% increase in the Arkansas.com referrals. These are expected increases as visitors are looking to start planning for the upcoming year.

Czerwinski reported First Day Hikes webpage had 7,873 page-views, a 33% increase from 2020, 6,143 unique page-views a 34% increase from 2020. The average stay time on the First Day Hikes webpage was 2 minutes and 2 seconds a 120% increase from 2020. The form submission was new this year with the First Day Hikes going virtual and self-reporting due to COVID; ASP had 735 forms submission and 155 photos were uploaded through CrowdRiff by visitors to the ASP gallery with 1,200 interactions and 586 views; it is positive to see these new tools working well on the webpage. Miles plans to use the forms submittal process again in May for ASP with some tweaks to make the form webpage more user friendly.

The total website traffic and conversion breakdown comparison shows an increase in October 2020 compared to October 2019 the booking site click is still lower than it was going into 2020 due to the challenges last year with the COVID-19 pandemic. The website users and booking site click conversion rate shows a major influx of traffic since the summer of 2020 and Miles anticipates this to continue to improve. The views on the ASP's accommodation pages continue to stay strong and exceed the 2019 levels since May of 2020. While the occupancy and reservations of the lodges are lower than in the past, ASP offers a unique blend of accommodation options and can provide the outdoor experience potential visitors are seeking.

The event page views show a 50% decrease in January 2021 compared to January 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Czerwinski remarked the interest in the First Day Hikes webpage shows visitors are ready and waiting for events to return to ASP when the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. The Digital Discovery webpage had 32,594 page-views from March 2020 through January 2021 with an average stay time of 7 minutes and 31 seconds for January 2021. ASP was seeing a 3-minute average stay time in 2020 but in January 2021, 7 minutes and 31 seconds stay time is very impressive and well above the national average. The combined Event and Digital Discovery graphic illustrates the Digital Discovery content is mitigating some of the lost traffic on the event calendar due to COVID-19. The website traffic from organic search has stayed strong since May 2020 and website traffic continues to outperform 2019 levels. Czerwinski provided a summary of the Miles reports; people are eager for programs and events to return to ASP. The conversion rate for booking is still down, but it follows a familiar yearly trend and expects that travel patterns are similar to previous years. There is an increased interest in guides and according to Destination Marketing Organization research, nearly 70% of potential visitors travel to the destinations after receiving a visitor guide. While some visitors are hesitant to travel and booking

further out, ASP has shown success with the weekend availability fly-in reporting a 63% conversion rate in bookings. Additionally, with camping occupancy up 88% and cabin occupancy up 52%, this has carried the increase in the accommodations and suggests that promoting unique lodging and under-booked camping and cabins could prove to be successful. Discussion ensued.

Break for 10 minutes 11:18 am

Tourism Committee Report

Austin Albers gave a brief report on what CRJW and Miles are doing with gathering data and conducting research to effectively find ways to market the state as well as being proactive in keeping Arkansas.com in front of people.

Tourism Director

Travis Napper reported that staff are coming back in the office on rotation. Napper informed the commission that Tammy Boyce was promoted to welcome center operations manager. Some of the welcome centers sustained minor damage after the snow and cold temperatures. The Harrison Welcome Center is closed due to water damage from a pump breaking and resulting plumbing issues. The Arkansas Department of Transportation is working to get the center open and operational.

Sales is working on international efforts with Mexico and Canada after the pandemic. Jessica Ledbetter is participating in the Southeast Tourism Society's virtual conference "Domestic Discovery" for tour operators.

Napper shared the news that the Great River Road received its designation as an All-American Road. Fifteen states were chosen, with eight of those states having the Great River Road designation. Travel writer Kim Williams worked to make it happen.

Communications is developing a technical cycling advisory committee which includes all components of cycling, e.g., mountain biking, road cycling, gravel grinding, etc. This group was created to ensure the correct information is communicated to the public in guides and online. Discussion ensued.

Napper reviewed the 2% tax collections. Literature requested for the end of FY20 through current is trending upward. Tourism is receiving a new report on occupancy rates for traditional and short-term rentals, and soon a comparison from year-to-year will be available.

Research and Development is working on Governor's Conference which is virtual only. Joy Barlogie gave an update on planning and what is to come at the conference. Jamie Clark will return as a featured keynote speaker. Dr. Young with NASA will also return as a speaker. Other sessions include Arkansas Game and Fish, Heritage Tourism, and the Arkansas Hospitality Association legislative session. There are new people who have registered from hotels, attractions, and influencers. The conference registration is free this year. Discussion ensued.

CJRW

Susie Kardas gave a report on the website analytics. Year-over-year total users saw a 22% increase. Partner referrals were down 9.5%. Guides ordered increased by 2.3%, while guides viewed online was down 1.8%. Newsletter subscriptions were down 35%. Month-over-month saw a 0.4% increase in total users. Partner referrals saw a 15% increase. Guides ordered increased by 115%. Guides viewed online saw a 67% increase and newsletter subscriptions increased slightly by 0.8%. Total traffic and conversion rate was up and down but moving up in January compared to the previous year's conversion rate. Accommodations listings saw a 65% decrease over the year. Restaurants saw a similar pattern compared to accommodations but picked up in December and January. There is a 35% decrease in the year. Organic traffic seems to be one of the things that has been helping in the last year. Average time on site is 1 minute and 53 seconds.

Kardas reported on website content. Dark skies and the 2024 eclipse are a couple of topics that have been added; the content is entitled "Go Stargazing." A landing page is being developed where one can view all things Arkansas sky. The Arkansas birding guide has also been added for download and viewing on the site. Extra content is being added for birding and watchable wildlife.

Chris Ho discussed the paid advertising and search engine performance with Bing and Google. Ho gave a breakdown of the cost per conversion between January 2020 and January 2021 and the difference with budget reductions. Bing is working very well. Combining buys between Google and Bing resulted in an increase in clicks and conversions. Conversion rates were down slightly; however, there was also less spend.

Keegan Wright gave a report on the social media performance. The new Travel Guide ad was launched. The cover of the guide was taken and made a living magazine online. Discussion ensued.

Blair Allen moved to adjourn the meeting. Ron Gossage seconded, and the motion carried.

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