STATE PARKS, RECREATION AND TRAVEL COMMISSION
Bentonville, Arkansas
February 26, 2025, 8:30 AM

Commissioners Present
Blair Allen, Chair
Austin Albers
Bob Connell
Clint Gaston
Jim Shamburger
Kalene Griffith
Randy Wolfinbarger
Rebecca Baker
Marshall Ney
Mitchell Allen
Molly Houseworth Jackson
Gary Vernon

Commissioners Absent
Shash Goyal
Eric Jackson
Jordan Wright

Natural State Initiative Council Present
First Gentleman Bryan Sanders
Tom Walton
Anne Marie Doramus
Matt Tarver
Phil Shellhammer
Danny Collins
Katherine Andrews
Bill Barnes
Martin Smith

Staff Present
Shea Lewis, Secretary, ADPHT
Suzanne Grobmyer, Chief of Staff, ADPHT
Dalaney Thomas, Tourism Director, Arkansas Tourism
Elaine Lienhart, Executive Assistant, ADPHT
Jami Fisher, Chief Financial Officer, ADPHT
Leah DiPietro, Tourism Deputy Director
Susie Cowan, Industry Relations Manager, Tourism
Kori Bull, Project Coordinator, Tourism
Jeff King, Deputy Director, Arkansas State Parks
Chris Meyers, Planning and Development Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Mike Wilson, Assistant Director
Britney Young, Marketing Manager, Arkansas Tourism
Klein Mitchell, Web Developer, Arkansas Tourism
William Armacost, Welcome Center Manager, Arkansas Tourism

CJRW
Darin Gray
Katherine Vasilos
Jill Joslin
Wade McCune
Mary Reed Hedges
Estephanie Perez
Sarah Rech
Sarah Vandorn
Brian Kratkiewicz
Keegan Wright
Blake Bowlin

MMGY
MJ Legault
John Entwistle

Guests
Matt Bell, Explore Harrison
Richard Sciarra, Explore Harrison
Bill Solider, Visit Hot Springs

Welcome and Call to Order
Chair Blair Allen called the meeting to order at 8:30 am. The SPRTC and NSI members introduced themselves around the table in place of the traditional roll call. The Chair thanked Explore Harrison, Townhouse Café, and Creekside Community Center for their participation and investment in the SPRTC's visit.

Approval of Agenda
Chairman Allen asked for a motion to approve the agenda.

Jim Shamburger made the motion to approve the agenda; Kalene Griffith seconded, and the motion carried.

Approval of January 2025 Minutes
Chairman Allen asked for a motion to approve the January 2025 minutes.

Kalene Griffith made the motion to approve the minutes; Molly Houseworth Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Approval of the Revised 2025 Schedule
Chairman Allen asked for a motion to approve the revised 2025 meeting schedule.

Kalene Griffith made the motion to approve the minutes; Molly Houseworth Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.

Approval of the Certificate of Appreciation
Secretary Shea Lewis presented for approval a Certificate of Appreciation to the Friends of Hobbs State Park Conservation Area for their exceptional generosity and unwavering support following the 2024 tornadoes. Chairman Allen asked for a motion to approve the certificate.

Jim Shamburger made the motion to approve the minutes; Randy Wolfinbarger seconded, and the motion carried.

NSI Priority Progress Reporting

TOURISM DIVISION

Director Thomas followed with introductions of the MMGY and CJRW representatives for updates to the brand. MJ Legault, Katherine Vasilos, and Wade McCune shared updates to the brand, the success of past campaigns and upcoming campaigns as the brand has been further refined.

The commissions discussed the storytelling strategies and the updated website design. All aspects are aimed at promoting stories that resonate with potential visitors and connect them to travel recommendations with actionable links. Director Thomas shared metrics reflecting increased bookings and the success of the strategies in early stages.

Chief of Staff Suzanne Grobmyer noted the importance of approximately 50% of northwest Arkansas residents have lived in the state five years or less and the opportunity that lies within the state.

Julie Freeman, PR Director at MMGY, shared PR strategies and recent and upcoming media placements.

Katherine Vasilos, CJRW, shared updates on brand partnerships, activations, and the snow market campaign. She took questions from the commissioners regarding influencers and the continued Arkansas Ambassador program.

STATE PARKS DIVISION

Shea Lewis, Secretary ADPHT State Parks, provided the following State Parks updates:

Queen Wilhelmina State Park and Trails at Mena:
The project is at a pivotal moment where decisions must be made about what will be included in the initial and subsequent phases. The final component of the NEPA process, the cultural review, is still in progress but State Parks hopes to have the final decision within the next 2-3 weeks. An RFI session request for information was completed by Catherine Andrews's team where data points were collected about what to look for in an operator and how the operating process should look. The team is also preparing for an RFP to help locate the operator.

Secretary Lewis shared a project diagram and explained that thanks to a study by Garver, it has been determined that the dam will remain in place and State Parks will need to work with the City of Mena to resolve some property issues. The initial phase of the project will include the mountain coaster zip line, climbing wall, support structures for the lift and experience, food and beverage infrastructure and up to 22 miles of mountain biking trails.

Per Deputy Director Jeff King, this project is an opportunity to engage with the elevation and beauty of the mountain. The lift itself will have over a thousand feet of elevation gain. Riders will be able to engage with the trail system through the forest. The goal is to have a welcoming area where visitors get out of their car, climb on their bikes and immediately become immersed in the experience. Training will be conducted so staff know how to engage both first time visitors and experts and, other experiences will be available for those who don't want to ride. The park will be an attraction for everyone!

Petit Jean State Park:

Secretary Lewis explained that the Petit Jean Master Plan was approved by the SPRTC earlier this year, so implementation is underway.

- A cultural resources study is being conducted by the Arkansas Archeological Survey.
- APRF, the Arkansas Climbers Coalition, and Cragworks, LLC are looking into different climbing opportunities.
- State Parks has begun the design process for the Via Ferrata.
- The Seven Hollows area is being looked at for a Monument Trails system.
- Renovations will begin at Mather Lodge in April.

Everything is coming together at the same time.

Per Mitchell Allen, Executive Director, Arkansas Parks & Recreation Foundation (APRF), he has been working with Cragworks and the Arkansas Archeological Society. Though there are a ton of cultural sites there, the archeological and climbing sites don't overlap that much. Most of the good climbing is on the more vertical walls and the archeology is under small overhangs. The team is just trying to figure out where the experience is within Seven Hollows. For the initial phase of maybe 30-40 bolted routes to start off. How much do we need to bolt to get people started coming and how much do we need to leave so climbers can come in and use their creativity? Petit Jean will be the beginning of Monument Climbs.

For mountain bike trails, Petit Jean doesn't have a big opportunity for big, downhill trails but, it has opportunity for glade trails. Seven Hollows could be 3.5 miles of slick, rock style trail going mostly downhill. It will be a unique experience. Other areas offer grand views over Cedar Creek Valley and other scenic views. We are looking at ways to connect the entire park with a single track or a 13–14-mile loop around the park.

Delta Heritage Trail State Park:

Per Jeff King, we are currently under contract with two of the last three sections of the trail and have crossed one of the rivers. Building is currently under way between the rivers leading up to the White River bridge from the north side and, the last project will be the White River bridge. The last phase will bid before the end of this fiscal year. King thanked the Walton Family Foundation and federal partners for helping with funding for the project since they are the ones making the project possible.

Per Katherine Andrews, Director Office of Outdoor Recreation (OOR), her team is working on two major things related to the Delta Heritage Trail.

- First is the initiative to build a trail town network connecting a lot of small towns in the Delta. This effort will help enhance what the towns are able to offer by themselves and better equip them for when visitors start coming to the area. OOR started reaching out to mayors and county judges along the network last July to help them understand the project vision and the impact it will have on their community and how to funnel people from the trail to local restaurants and different types of amenities. The team continues to convene regular meetings and pull these stakeholders together.
- The next step will be infrastructure development which will include developing parks near the trailheads as well as RV and camping sites so guests will stay overnight. The goal is to utilize grants from sources like OOR, ARDOT, and other sources to help with the infrastructure development. OOR is partnering with Tourism and the Arkansas Economic Development Commission (AEDC).

The RFP goal is to secure a contract to execute a series of opening events and programing for the opening. Not only do we want visitors to come but, we want to ensure there are good programming and experiences for the guests to enjoy. The RFP is almost ready to send to procurement. OOR is looking for a good partner to help make the project a really big deal.

Pinnacle Mountain State Park and the Maumelle Pinnacles Conservation Area:

Per Suzanne Grobmyer, one of the big projects ADPHT has worked on in the last quarter is the idea of a vast green space located amongst the largest population in Arkansas. The goal is to make green space much more accessible and meaningful for everyone who lives in or travels to Little Rock and Central Arkansas. One of the opportunities was driven by a partnership between ADPHT, ARDOT, OOR, and the City of Little Rock to go in on a federal BUILD grant to support the 30-Crossing Project in downtown Little Rock which would be a sort of trailhead and gateway to the Maumelle Pinnacles. When people come to stay in downtown Little Rock, this gateway will help to purposely drive visitation from downtown to other cultural assets in the Maumelle Pinnacles.

Per Katherine Andrews, the final draft of the Maumelle Pinnacles plan is under review and it's over a hundred pages. OOR has been working on the plan with at least 10 partners over the past year and, it's been about 5 years since the inception of the plan. Partners include everyone from government agencies, to NGOs, city, and county. It's a major collaborative effort. Once the plan is implemented, it'll take decades to see the full fruition of the project.

Mitchell Allen added that Maumelle Pinnacles goes from downtown Little Rock out to the forest. The connection between Pinnacle Mountain, Rattlesnake Ridge, and the Blue Mountain Natural Area, which includes 13.5 miles of trail, will happen quickly. The trail has been flagged and should go out for bid next month with construction beginning later this year. The project will create a kind of "Urban Wilderness" within 15 minutes of downtown Little Rock. The trail connects approximately 60 miles of single track just outside of town and will include beautiful scenery including almost 4 miles of trail along the edge of the Lake Maumelle shore which was approved by Central Arkansas Water.

Secretary Lewis opened the floor for commentary on Natural State Day, Governor's Conference on Tourism, or other topics for discussion. Commissioners Griffith, Shamburger and councilman Barnes gave positive reviews on Natural State Day and the success they experienced in connecting with legislators. The discussion continued with recommendations for continuing strategic outreach to partners and legislators. This portion closed with final remarks from First Gentleman Bryan Sanders.

Finance

Chief Fiscal Officer Jami Fisher presented the FY 2025 Year-to-Date Financial Report for the one (2) month period ending August 31, 2024.

FY 2025 Year-to-Date Revenues were:

- Parks Division Operating Revenue - $6,512,029 a decrease of .54%
- War Memorial Operating Revenue - $113,727 an increase of 48.44%
- 1/8 Cent Conservation Tax Revenue - $8,061,015 an increase of 2.68%
- 2% Gross Tax Collections - $5,541,005 an increase of 1.34%

Kalene Griffith made the motion to approve the financials; Gary Vernon seconded, and the motion carried.

STATE PARKS DIVISION

Director's Report/Parks Committee Report

Jeff King, Deputy Director Arkansas State Parks, gave the following updates:

State Parks has a winter promotion that runs through March 1, 2025, that gives 15% off camping and lodging. Arkansas based influencers are being utilized this year to help promote this winter sales event and, the promotion has performed well. Last year's promotion, which ran through end of month January, sold 901 units. This year's promotion has already sold 2,156 units. This year's promotion is up $124,000 over last year and it appears the brand influencers are helping. The results will be presented during the April Commission meeting.

Deputy Director King again thanked the Friend of Hobbs and the team at Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area for their storm recovery efforts after last May's storm events. He called out the great job that volunteer coordinator Carla Berg does in organizing groups at the park to tackle various projects whether it be cleanup or routine trail maintenance at the 12,000-acre park. King called out that several big contractors from Northwest Arkansas are assisting with renovation work on the 41 miles of trail that were impacted by the storms. Arkansas State Parks continues to make an investment in getting the trails open and back available to the public. They won't be the same as they were before but, they will be open for recreation and can still provide great experiences. Approximately $860,000 has been spent so far and State Parks hopes to get 75% of that amount back from FEMA in terms of public assistance

Mount Nebo State Park – Hansell Property *

Jeff King requested initial authorization by the SPRTC for Arkansas State Parks to acquire a 40-acre tract of property at Mount Nebo State Park.

Bob Connell made a motion to approve. Kalene Griffith seconded, and the motion carried.

Petit Jean State Park – Albert Property *

King asked for approval for a User Permit Agreement at Petit Jean State Park for a new landowner who just bought property. A permit has been in place for the property since the 1980s so, this is an

authorization for the new owner for an acre of land 25 feet by 489 feet to the east of the Museum of Automobiles.

Jim Shamburger made a motion to approve. Rebecca Baker seconded, and the motion carried.

Crowley's Ridge State Park – Summer Splash Aqua Park, LLC *
King requested approval for a new concession lease agreement at Crowley's Ridge State Park. The agreement would allow for a 3-year lease to Summer Splash Aqua Park, LLC for the Lake Ponder area to add a water park. The concessionaire would invest $226,000 into the development and take over some of the operational costs in terms of staffing of lifeguards for the water park and beach swimming as well as staffing for the snack bar and gift shop area.

Kalene Griffith made a motion to approve. Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.

Systemwide – Arkansas Natural & Cultural Resources Council FY26 Grant Application – Certification of Approval *
Deputy Director King requested approval of the provided grant application document detailing the ANCRC FY26 grant cycle request. The request totals $25M.

Kalene Griffith made a motion to approve. Rebecca Baker seconded, and the motion carried.

MISCELLANEOUS/CLOSING
There were no public comments.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned by Chairman Allen at 11:19 a.m.

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I acknowledge these minutes are approved:

x _____

Blair Allen
Chair