

**STATE PARKS, RECREATION AND TRAVEL COMMISSION**  
**Searcy-Harding University, Cone Chapel**  
**March 16, 2023, 8:00 a.m.**

**Commissioners Present**

Randy Wolfinbarger, Chair  
Austin Albers  
Blair Allen  
Trey Berry  
Bob Connell  
Mike Wilson  
Ron Gossage  
Kalene Griffith  
Molly Houseworth-Jackson  
Eric Jackson  
Weston Lewey  
Jim Shamburger

**Commissioners Absent**

Montine McNulty, Vice-Chair  
Shash Goyal  
Rebecca Baker  
Ness Sechrest  
Mike Gibson

**Staff Present**

Mike Mills, Secretary, ADPHT  
Suzanne Grobmyer, Chief of Staff, ADPHT  
Shealyn Sowers, Chief of Communications, ADPHT  
Elaine Lienhart, Executive Assistant, ADPHT  
Jami Fisher, Chief Financial Officer, ADPHT  
Travis Napper, Director, Arkansas Tourism  
Kristine Puckett, Deputy Director, Arkansas Tourism  
Susie Cowan, Project Coordinator, Arkansas Tourism  
Shea Lewis, Director, State Parks  
Jeff King, Deputy Director, State Parks  
Yolanda Brown, Executive Assistant, State Parks  
Chris Myers, Planning and Development, State Parks  
Mike Wilson, Parks Operations Manager, State Parks  
Darin Mitchell, GIS Analyst, State Parks

**CJRW**

Darin Gray  
Jessica Frahm  
Dalaney Thomas  
Blake Bowlin  
Mark Raines

**Miles Partnership**

Susie Kardas  
Kelly Parker

**Guests**

Gary Jones – Gary Jones Video  
Steve Watts – The Daily Citizen  
Kellie Kelly – USPS, District Sales  
Jason Almond – USPS, Sr. Executive

### **Welcome and Call to Order**

The meeting was called to order at 8:01 a.m. by Chair Randy Wolfinbarger. Wolfinbarger thanked Harding University for the meeting space and a great bus tour; the Searcy Regional Economic Development Corporation for the hospitality suite at the hotel, hospitality for the reception and after dinner. Also, a thank you to the Searcy Advertising & Promotion for the hors d'oeuvres, dinner (by Savory Catering), and the wonderful dessert bar, as well as the refreshments at this morning's meeting. Elaine Lienhart called the roll.

### **Approval of Agenda**

Chairman Randy Wolfinbarger asked for a motion to approve the agenda.

**Commissioner Mike Wilson made a motion to approve the agenda; Eric Jackson seconded, and the motion carried.**

### **Approval of the Minutes**

Chairman Randy Wolfinbarger asked for a motion to approve the January minutes.

**Commissioner Austin Albers made a motion to approve the minutes; Kalene Griffith seconded, and the motion carried.**

### **Secretary's Report**

Secretary Mike Mills presented the Secretary's report by first acknowledging and presenting Kalene Griffith, Jim Shamburger and Eric Jackson with a plaque thanking them for their prior years of Chairing the SPRTC. Secretary Mills went on to say the Governor's Conference on Tourism was a great success thanks to Travis and his team. The Governor and First Gentleman made an appearance. The day following the conference was the signing of the Proclamation at Petit Jean by the Governor; the First Gentleman was also present. The Proclamation commemorated the 100th Anniversary of State Parks on March 1, 2023. Shea and his team are to be commended. Mills talked about the hike to Cedar Falls that took place afterwards with the Governor and First Gentleman. The rain held out until after the hike was over. Mills ended his report by introducing Marty Ryall to present the Legislative Report.

### **Legislative Report**

Director of Legislative Affairs, Marty Ryall, presented the legislative report and opened with Legislative Session updates. The Session traditionally runs 60 days until March 9, but the session has been extended to April 7. Ryall gave a run through of the legislative initiatives for ADPHT and the various stages of the process. One is professional services contracts, raising the limit from \$50,000 to \$150,000; currently Keep Arkansas Beautiful reports directly to the Secretary and is being moved under Arkansas State Parks (the bill has passed and awaiting the Governor's signature), and the 100 Centennial Year Resolution, which has passed and signed by the Governor.

Another that directly affects this commission is a little realignment of SPRTC. Currently there are four representatives of the media and condensing that down. Also, there is a movement within the legislature to do away with emeritus positions across state government; SPRTC has two emeritus positions. Another realignment is the Delta Cultural Center Advisory Board, a board that's had a difficult time filling positions. They haven't met in several years (and currently only have five members whose terms are expired). We want to widen the scope as to who can be on the board. Chairman Weston Lewey asked for clarity of the Delta Cultural Center Board. He explained that there are 11 members and every board term has expired, leaving five that are still serving. The five still serving are because you can continue to serve until your replacement is appointed. He went on to explain that current requirements for those people that serve must come from an organization that no longer exists.

Eric Jackson asked a question regarding the bill for the composition of this Commission. Marty Ryall responded by stating that the commission will stay the same size; the designated positions are essentially going to go away. However, no one will be removed from the commission as terms expire; the designated ones will no longer exist. Marty Ryall deferred to General Counsel, Daniel Faulkner, for further clarity of the composition of the commission relative to emeritus positions. Daniel Faulkner confirmed that no one will be removed from the commission. As terms expire the number of commissioners will remain the same, but the designated positions will be at-large. The 15 standing members stay and essentially will be at-large positions.

### **FINANCIAL REPORT – FEBRUARY 28, 2023**

Chief Fiscal Officer Jami Fisher presented the FY 2023 Year-to-Date Financial Report for the eight-month period ending February 28, 2023.

FY 2023 Year-to-Date Revenues were:

- Parks Division Operating Revenue - \$19,315,206 an increase of 2.44%
- War Memorial Operating Revenue - \$849,884 a decrease of 3.10%
- 1/8 Cent Conservation Tax Revenue - \$31,011,774 an increase of 11.20%
- 2% Gross Tax Collections - \$17,420,618 an increase of 11.10%

FY 2023 Year-to-Date Expenditures were:

- Parks Division (including Construction and Grants) - \$64,807,894 an increase of 23.74%
- Tourism Division - \$11,894,293 an increase of 44.17%
- War Memorial - \$1,269,515 an increase of 34.57%
- Department Total - \$77,971,702 an increase of 26.64%

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

**Eric Jackson made a motion to approve; Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.**

### **State Parks Division**

#### **Director's Report**

Director Shea Lewis opened his report by touching on the many events that have taken place since the last commission meeting, which include his opportunity to speak to lots of groups about the Centennial Events taking place, and the 2023 Governor's Conference on Tourism. Director Lewis mentioned that a Senate Joint Resolution passed through the House of Representatives to recognize Arkansas State Parks Centennial Year as well as 100 years of Arkansas State Parks existing and the importance of the State Parks system in the economy, the education system, and the role of state parks plays in the contributions to quality of life. He expressed how impressed he was with how the State Parks staff came together through this resolution for the celebration of the anniversary of the Centennial. Director Lewis expressed his excitement about the history of Arkansas State Parks, thinking about milestones that have happened throughout our careers. Director Lewis showed photos of the Petit Jean State Park Centennial Proclamation event, expressing how great it was to watch Governor Sanders attending with First Gentleman and interacting with the staff and the signing of the proclamation (it is available to watch on Arkansas State Parks website). Director Lewis pointed out that table that was behind Governor Sanders was purposeful in the signing of the proclamation. The table was a CCC table similar to the one seen in a picture of President Woodrow Wilson signing a bill in a National Park. Director Lewis mentioned the hike that took place afterwards with Governor Sanders and the First Gentleman to the Cedar Creek Canyon. He also touched on the First Gentleman's plans to visit all 52 Arkansas State Parks.

Director Lewis stated the Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation received a grant of \$99,000 from the Walton Family Foundation for a new program, Monument Climbs. It will be an expansion of the recreational climbing program. Lewis mentioned they will work closely with Dennis Nelms, the Executive Director of Vertical LLC, looking at support and infrastructure for increased rock climbing within Arkansas State Parks. Director Lewis added that the program will begin at Mount Magazine State Park, which received \$30,000 for inventory and assessing current rock-climbing capabilities. Petit Jean State Park received \$45,000 for assessment of rock climbing within the park, identifying climbing zones, and estimating the number of climbing and routes available. He explained the process will take place in the next year with looking at the rock-climbing process for Arkansas State Parks policy and protecting natural and cultural resources along the way and expanding in the recreational opportunity.

Lewis announced we are 389 days away from the Eclipse and the reason why it's so important to Arkansas State Parks, besides the obvious tourism impact. He reminded everyone the reservation window for 2024 would open on April 8 at midnight, with commission approval of a 30% increase which also includes dynamic pricing allowing an additional increase of 20% and decrease of 50%, depending on the market and response to the event. There was also an approval for a 4-night minimum stay, Friday through Monday, or 4 nights Saturday through Tuesday for eclipse events. Director Lewis stated the standard cancellation policy will still be followed. Director Lewis recognized the hard work of the Revenue Operations Manager Jeannie Brenner. She has dedicated herself to improvements to the reservation system in preparation of the eclipse events. He explained that the online reservation system is better but still not up to industry standards, which has been a struggle. He is hopeful for progress with an internal deadline of January 2024.

Director Lewis provided an update on the Queen Wilhelmina State Park Train Concession. As he had reported during the last Commission meeting, Queen Wilhelmina State Park Train Concession Agreement had expired January 30 and the operation has been for sale. At that point in time there had been no contact with the current concession operator, Mr. Elkins. The concession is still for sale, but Mr. Elkins advised he was hoping to continue operations of the train through this year or until it sells. Director Lewis advised a letter was sent to Mr. Elkins this week that outlined the steps required to take place in order for him to operate. Lewis stated a new agreement would have to be executed before operation, with approval after all conditions have been met. Director Lewis advised this may call for a special commission meeting via online zoom in the event that he wants to operate.

Director Lewis announced the Conservation Area Partnership between Central Arkansas Water and Outdoor Recreation. This agreement is an MOU that allows the planning, development, and management of the recreational amenities, that's being called the Maumelle Pinnacles. It starts at Pinnacle Mountain State Park and includes Rattlesnake Ridge, Blue Mountain and goes all the way to the Lake Sylvia Recreation Area. It has created the opportunity for working together with land managing partners to find opportunities for connectivity and recreation. Katherine Andrews, Director of the Office of Outdoor Recreation, saw the opportunity to bring everyone together formally through the MOU, growing the trail connectivity to those other resources which are known well in West Little Rock. This partnership will continue to grow the demand for recreational resources higher than ever.

Director Lewis provided an update on Historic Washington State Park and continuing to move forward with the action plan. He announced the addition of two additional draft horses, designing for additional sidewalks, and contracting with WER Architects for specific facility improvements. He mentioned moving forward with the design for improvements to the 1874 Courthouse HVAC system. With bidding this week, there will be a new contract for repair and replacement of six deteriorated wood shake roofs on historic structures. A contract of \$392,000 was signed with Kinco Constructors for the B.W. Edwards Weapons Museum stabilization improvements. There has been an approval to move forward with Kinco on the renovation of the Historic Moss Williams House as well.

Director Lewis provided an update on the Pinnacle Mountain Visitor Center, announcing it is very close to completion and moving ahead as scheduled. Exhibits close to completion with Program Manager Kelly Ferrell and her team working to install exhibits later this summer and possibly a dedication in early October.

Susie Kardas with Miles Partnership provided an update of the State Parks site visitation trend for the months of January and February 2023 and what's being seen as the top visitation sites. She reported that over the last four years visitation has spiked. It's 24% higher than the previous four years, including 2020. Ms. Kardas stated that there's still engagement with booking, being 13% higher, and clicks to the booking site are also 13% higher than it was over the previous four years. This means not only are people coming to the site, but it also shows their intentions to travel. She reported that 18- to 24-year-olds are visiting the site more, with 65+ being the second group, giving a true testament to the hospitality of the State Parks. People who went for the first time during COVID loved it and now it's one of the first places they want to go visit. People are choosing to come to the parks instead of going to the beach, which is something to really be proud of.

Director Lewis stated Arkansas State Parks revenue continues to increase and continuing to build our programs to accommodate park guests. We are seeing more registrations, more bookings for interpretive workshops, as well as the attendance at free programs, putting Arkansas State Parks in an overall good place. Revenues are up even with the temporary closing of Lake Catherine State Park.

Operations Manager, Mike Wilson, presented an update on Lake Catherine State Park. Wilson recognized and thanked all who played an important part in the execution, completion, and reopening of the park. He stated closure signs will come down on Friday and the park will open to the general public on Saturday, taking one day reservations. Wilson mentioned the replacement of the wastewater plant repairs and updates were included in the renovation project. Other renovations included the update of 20 cabins, visitor center, restrooms, bathhouses, sidewalk improvements, parking lot asphalt updates, utility valve shut off replacement, picnic table and bench replacements, and trash can renovations throughout the park with many other countless updates and renovations. The Lake Catherine State Park staff completed pressure washing of all the buildings and the trail crew made repairs to the Falls Branch Trail, a National Recreation Trail. Wilson stated, within only 79 days, he was proud of everyone that played a part in the project and re-opening the park as scheduled.

#### **Park Policies, Rules & Directives**

Systemwide Update of Park Directive No. 1030 regarding Concession Leases & Agreements.

Deputy Director Jeff King presented a request for the Commission to approve Policy Statement #1030-revised to reflect final Commission approval authority for all concession leases and agreements one year or greater in duration and with anticipated annual gross sales greater than \$20,000 entered into by the Division of State Parks. The final policy was presented in accordance with direction received at the January 2023 SPRTC meeting.

**Eric Jackson made the motion to approve; Bob Connell seconded, and the motion carried.**

#### **Agreements**

Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological Agreement with the Arkansas Archeological Survey

Deputy Director King presented a request to renew the Operating Agreement with the Arkansas Archeological Survey at Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park. This agreement allows AAS to maintain a research station at Plum Bayou Mounds Archeological State Park which provides research and educational information to park staff and interpreters for programming.

**Bob Connell made a motion to approve; Mike Wilson seconded the motion carried.**

#### Parkin Archeological Agreement with the Arkansas Archeological Survey

King presented the request to renew the Operating Agreement with the Arkansas Archeological Survey at Parkin Archeological State Park. Arkansas State Parks has had a cooperative operating Agreement with the Arkansas Archeological Survey (AAS) at Parkin Archeological State Park since the early 1990's. This agreement allows AAS to maintain a research station at Parkin Archeological State Park which provides research and educational information to park staff and interpreters for programming.

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

#### Ozark Folk Center Property Lease with the City of Mountain View

Information and Innovation Manager, Darin Mitchell presented the renewal request of a 237-acre lease. The renewal term will extend the lease from April 1, 2023, until June 30, 2033, to run concurrently with the main 80-acre Ozark Folk Center State Park lease with the same option to extend the lease agreement for another term of five (5) years. In total, and with approval of this lease proposal, the State Parks Division will lease 637 acres from the City of Mountain View until the year 2033. Note, the State Parks Division owns an additional 3.46 acres of land bringing the total land management acreage at Ozark Folk Center to 640.46 areas.

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

#### Lake Frierson Property removal request Pump House

Mitchell presented a request for removal of structure from inventory. Catherine Combs, Superintendent of Lake Frierson State Park, has requested permission to remove Pumphouse (**Building No. 26.11/AASIS No. 120005921**), a 55 square foot wood frame structure with a concrete floor and asphalt shingles built in 1999.

**Molly Houseworth-Jackson made a motion to approve; Weston Lewey seconded, and the motion carried.**

#### Powhatan Historic Property removal request Wright House

Mitchell presented a request for removal of structure from inventory. Kristyn Watts, Superintendent of Powhatan Historic State Park, has requested permission to remove the Wright residential structure (**Building No. 62.44/AASIS No. 120007569**), a three-bedroom, one bath 936 square foot residential building built in approximately 1945. The residence is a single-story wood framed structure with asphalt roof and asbestos siding.

**Trey Berry made a motion to approve; Jim Shamburger seconded, and the motion carried.**

#### Planning and Development

##### Devil's Den Memorial Tree Donations

Planning & Development Manager Chris Myers presented tree donations for Devil's Den State Park by Susan Collins - a family donation of two trees in honor of two relatives, Mary Zimmer and Kane Koenigseder. The two trees would be planted around Campsite 96 in Campground E. This is the campsite that their family has camped at for over 47 years, especially on Fourth of July weekends.

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

## **TOURISM DIVISION**

### **Director's Report**

Travis Napper shared comments about the 49<sup>th</sup> Governor's Conference on Tourism. There were 478 industry attendees and 140 El Dorado attendees. More than 150 attendees identified themselves as being first-time registrants. Travis reiterated that he is open to ideas from the Commission for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Discover Arkansas had five articles for the January theme encouraging readers to go ahead and plan their trips. There were six articles in February for the Craft Beverage theme and the Craft Beverage Passport was released. In the first two weeks, over 750 participants signed up. This program is valuable to residents as well as visitors.

Arkansas Tourism received a lot of good press during this time period. There were ten different news releases and four different articles in Southern Living.

The Arkansas Tourism team attended the Ideal Living Conference with a relocation and retirement focus along with our partners from Hot Springs Village. There were 450 booth visitors, 642 total leads, and six discovery packages booked during the event. Additional shows attended include the International Inbound Travel Association Summit and the Mississippi River Country Sales Mission in Toronto, Canada.

The 2% tax collection continues to outperform with 22 consecutive months of being the best month on record.

Longwood and Miles travel sentiment study reports intent to travel is at the highest point since the beginning of the pandemic. Tourism Economics reports slippage is most evident among lower income earners. Arkansas is prepared in the event of a recession because it is an affordable destination.

### **Marketing and Research**

Jessica Frahm presented research results from the visitor persona survey conducted in November and December 2022. The top five personas in Arkansas's audience include Event Fans, Field and Stream, American History, Beer Me's-Craft beer enthusiasts, and the Wild Bunch (families that like outdoor experiences.)

Sara Meany from Coraggio presented the Arkansas Tourism strategic plan. July through December was Get Clear (in-depth discovery phase) which included listening sessions, townhall sessions, industry survey, and one-on-one interviews. January through March was Get Focused (what is most important to move Arkansas Tourism forward), which included identifying organizational values. April through June will be Get Moving phase where the Division sets priorities. Travis reviewed the new mission, vision, values, and position statement.

### **MISCELLANEOUS/CLOSING**

There was no public comment.

With no further business,

**Commissioner Kalene Griffith made a motion to adjourn; Mike Wilson seconded, and the motion carried. The meeting adjourned at 11:09 a.m.**

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