

STATE PARKS, RECREATION AND TRAVEL COMMISSION

Little Rock, AR

April 18, 2024, 9:00 AM

APPROVED MAY 16, 2024

Commissioners Present

Jim Shamburger, Chair
Blair Allen, Vice-Chair
Rebecca Baker
Kalene Griffith
Bob Connell
Ron Gossage
Shash Goyal
Mike Wilson
Austin Albers
Molly Houseworth-Jackson
Eric Jackson
Weston Lewey

Commissioners Absent

Trey Berry
Eric Jackson
Mike Gibson
Randy Wolfinbarger

Staff Present

Shea Lewis, Secretary, ADPHT
Suzanne Grobmyer, Chief of Staff, ADPHT
Clay Stone, General Counsel, ADPHT
Dalaney Thomas, Tourism Director, Arkansas Tourism
April Kiser, Deputy Chief of Communications, ADPHT
Elaine Lienhart, Executive Assistant, ADPHT
Jami Fisher, Chief Financial Officer, ADPHT
Carson Callaway, Controller, ADPHT
Kristine Puckett, Deputy Director, Arkansas Tourism
Susie Cowan, Industry Relations Manager, Tourism
Kori Bull, Project Coordinator, Tourism
Jeff King, Deputy Director, Arkansas State Parks
Mike Wilson, Assistant Director, Arkansas State Parks
Jeannine Bruner, Revenue Operations Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Chris Meyers, Planning and Development Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Darin Mitchell, Information & Innovation Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Kelly Farrell, Chief of Interpretation & Program Services
Marty Ryall, Director, Div. of AR Heritage & Legislative Affairs Director, ADPHT

CJRW

Darin Gray
Jessica Frahm
Mark Raines
Blake Bowlin

Miles Partnership

Guests

Evan Teague, Farm Bureau
Bill Solleder, Visit Hot Springs

Welcome and Call to Order

Chair Jim Shamburger called the meeting to order at 8:59 am. Elaine Lienhart called roll. The Chair thanked Katrice & Carrie with Delta Hotels for the meeting space, and LRCVB for sponsoring Wednesday evening's social hour and dinner at Copper Grill. Chair Shamburger welcomed guests.

Approval of Agenda

Chairman Shamburger asked for a motion to approve the agenda.

Weston Lewey made the motion to approve the agenda; Shash Goyal seconded, and the motion carried.

Approval of February 2024 Minutes

Chairman Jim Shamburger asked for a motion to approve the February 2024 minutes.

Bob Connell made the motion to approve the minutes; Austin Albers seconded, and the motion carried.

Secretary's Report

Secretary Shea Lewis shared a few updates with the Commission:

He introduced and welcomed April Kiser, the new Deputy Chief of Communications and Public Information Officer for Arkansas State Parks. Kiser has over 24 years of experience. Lewis also reintroduced Clay Stone, General Counsel for ADPHT. Stone has over 20 years of experience in the private sector. Carson Callaway was acknowledged as the Financial Controller. Dalaney Thomas introduced Kori Bull, the new Project Coordinator for Tourism.

FREEHUB's recent publication (issue 15.1) features Arkansas mountain biking and is entitled Arkansas Photo Book: A Visual Guide to the State's finest Trails. It is a coffee table book for mountain bikers. Copies will be mailed to partners across the state.

The RFP process is ongoing. A public notice of award hasn't been issued yet, but the process is moving along well.

2024 Eclipse Update

Secretary Lewis shared the following insights about the 2024 Eclipse.

Final visitation numbers for the state for the Eclipse weekend won't be in until next month. Arkansas showcased well with visitors. Out-of-state visitors were driven specifically to tourism destinations and there were many festivals, events, and activities throughout the state. Most guests wanted to be in scenic areas to view the eclipse.

Though we were fortunate to have good weather, bookings came and went depending on the weather forecast. Most Arkansans decided to stay home and enjoy the eclipse from home. Arkansas Welcome Centers had 41k guests. The Secretary's office hasn't received a single complaint. The success of the day was due to a collaborative, statewide effort that included multiple departments, divisions, agencies, and municipalities.

Jeff King, Deputy Director of Arkansas State Parks, thanked the State Parks team for helping to make this event successful. State parks welcomed 239k visitors over the 4-day period. The day of the eclipse

event compared similarly to Memorial Day last year which saw 66k visitors. Six parks reached capacity and had to close due to the influx of day-use guests: Pinnacle Mountain, Mount Nebo, Lake Frierson, Lake Dardanelle, Lake Charles, & Crater of Diamonds. 25 parks were in total, 22 of those have overnight accommodations. Totality occupancy was 90%. State Parks had been at 96% a few days prior the final occupancy total was slightly less. Overall, occupancy was 80%. All states except Vermont and Rhode Island were represented with bookings at State Parks for overnight reservations. The remarkable figure with this event was that 81% of bookings were from out of state.

Emergency Services set up the Ready Ops System to share real time updates with our teams.

State parks offered a wide variety of experiences for guests to do on the front and back end of the eclipse, including 297 interpretive programs (87 programs were eclipse specific).

Dalaney Thomas, Tourism Director, gave a report on the recent eclipse. Although mobile location data, credit card spend data, and 2% collections are not expected to be available until next month, anecdotal and on-the-ground reports from the industry has been beneficial in understanding the event's impact. The eclipse was an opportunity for the state to be on the world stage and attract a different type of traveler. Welcome Centers reported to have welcomed 40,000 visitors during the 10-day eclipse window, including guests from England, Germany, Austria, Dominican Republic, Japan, Ukraine, Korea, and Italy, among other countries. The Little Rock Downtown River Market reported to be up 118% for occupancy for the night of April 7. Hot Springs saw record visitation. Russellville estimated to have welcomed 50,000 visitors with representation from 50 states and 36 countries. Searcy saw visitors from 43 states and 12 countries. Cherokee Village had 500-600 participants for their eclipse event and welcomed 50 private planes. Walnut Ridge reported one fly-in from Hawaii. Agency partners reported 1 million views on eclipse Instagram stickers and coverage from eight national and 20 local media outlets. Visitors appeared to have stayed after the eclipse, with the Museum of Discovery reporting 400 visitors on April 9, compared to 171 visitors the previous year. Thomas concluded and there were no questions from the commission or audience.

FINANCIAL REPORT – March 31, 2024

Chief Fiscal Officer Jami Fisher presented the FY 2024 Year-to-Date Financial Report for the nine-month period ending March 31, 2024.

FY 2024 Year-to-Date Revenues were:

- Parks Division Operating Revenue - \$24,624,362 an increase of 9.75%
- War Memorial Operating Revenue - \$1,310,928 an increase of 37.80%
- 1/8 Cent Conservation Tax Revenue - \$35,536,588 an increase of .86%
- 2% Gross Tax Collections - \$19,086,647 a decrease of 5.29%

FY 2024 Year-to-Date Expenditures were:

- Parks Division (including Construction and Grants) - \$79,609,235 an increase of 5.73%
- Tourism Division - \$14,488,072 a decrease of -18.24%
- War Memorial - \$1,447,679 an increase of 9%
- Department Total - \$95,544,986 an increase of 6.78%

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

Weston Lewey made the motion to approve the financials; Gary Vernon seconded, and the motion carried.

Jami Fisher requested approval for a Certificate of Appreciation for David Flake who served nearly 30 years with the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism.

Austin Albers made the motion to approve the certificate; Mike Wilson seconded, and the motion carried.

STATE PARKS DIVISION

Director's Report

Jeff King, Deputy Director, shared updates on the following items:

- March was a good month for State Parks, revenue wise. Camping occupancy was 46% which was the highest it's been in the past 5–6-year period. Arkansas had some great weather. Lodging occupancy was 47%; cabins 59% occupancy.
- Spring Break: Revenue was up \$83k in overnight bookings for Arkansas spring break week; occupancy was up 8%.
- Mike Wilson has been promoted to Assistant Director for State Parks. This is a new position for Parks but repurposes an existing position for the agency.
- Centennial Service 100 Hours of Service Award: Grand Prize Winner is Ken Farmer of the Friends of Hobbs group who won the hiking stick and two-nights stay in an Arkansas State Park.
- ASP Night at Travs will be May 17.
- Pinnacle Mountain State Park: Loblolly Outpost continuing weekend operations Fri-Sun 11am-5pm for now, while we continue to fix some issues at the facility. Shea signed off on temporary hours back in March. Parks will reevaluate their hours around Memorial Day.
- POS/PMS system: Efforts being led by Jeannine Bruner and Scott Blankenship. Heritage Division will go live with their POS in their museum shops next week. Right now, parks are importing inventories for all campsites. The gift card program is being developed. Photo assets are being captured by the department's in-house photographers. The POS/PMS system for state parks is planned to go live in June.

Devil's Den State Park - Certificate of Appreciation – Monte Fuller *

Jeff King requested approval for a Certificate of Appreciation for Monte Fuller who served 41 years with Arkansas State Parks.

Shash Goyal made a motion to approve the certificate. Rebecca Baker seconded, and the motion carried.

Real Estate Leases & Agreements

Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area & Crowley's Ridge State Park – Initial approval for property acquisitions (per A.C.A. 22-4-106) *

Darin Mitchell, Manager of Information & Innovation, asked for initial approval for property acquisitions at Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area and Crowley's Ridge State Park. The Crowley's Ridge property is a donation by J.W. Black Lumber Company that consists of 60 acres. It is not contiguous with the park. The Hobbs donation is being purchased by the Friends of Hobbs (FOH) and consists of 111 acres. Upon successful acquisition of the property, FOH intends to donate the property to ASP for conservation management and public recreation.

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

Planning & Development

Select Parks – FY24 RTP/TAP Grant Memo and Resolutions *

Chris Myers, Manager of Planning and Development, asked for approval of the grant memo and resolutions document detailing proposed projects for the FY24 RTP/TAP grant cycle.

Shash Goyal made a motion to approve the memo. Mike Wilson seconded, and the motion carried.

Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area – Friends of Hobbs – MOA for Playscapes Donation *

Myers asked the commission for approval of a Playscapes donation by Friends of Hobbs at Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area.

Austin Albers made a motion to approve the Playscapes. Kalene Griffith seconded, and the motion carried.

Systemwide – CIP Quarterly Report (3rd Quarter FY2024)

Chris Myers presented the current report which includes \$47M in encumbered funds for capital projects. This report was provided for review only.

TOURISM DIVISION

Director's Report

Dalaney Thomas reported on Tourism Fund Planning. The Tourism Fund Plan references the 2% fund that grew over the pandemic. With the assistance of Chairman Jim Shamburger, plans are under development for the biennium budget. The development of the plan will consist of four hosted listening sessions across Arkansas to collaborate with industry partners and organizations. Kickoff calls with the group are beginning this month. Members of the group are tasked with industry outreach and bringing recommendations to the commission. The group will consist of representatives from Arkansas Tourism, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Department of Commerce, airports, and convention and visitor's bureau representatives, among others. A goal of this planning is to collaborate with partners and organizations that are marketing themselves but could possibly experience more effective results if we cohesively marketed together. The conversations with industry members across the state will ideally be used to help Arkansas Tourism and its partners develop a three-year marketing plan to spend the funds

down in a manner that elevates the 2% tax in coming years. Jim Shamburger asked to be a part of this new committee.

Bob Connell made the motion to allow Jim Shamburger to represent the SPRTC on the strategic planning committee; Mike Wilson seconded, and the motion was carried.

Thomas reported that she travelled to Washington, D.C. with Kalene Griffith to attend the U.S. Travel Association's Destination Capitol Hill. The goal of this trip was to have an influx of travel and tourism representatives in D.C. engaging with their legislators to inform them of the economic impact of the travel and tourism industry, what help is needed, and the state of the industry. They met with five of six representatives. Thomas expressed appreciation for Congressman Westerman and his efforts in representing major acts to aid the growth of the outdoor recreation industry, including the recently passed EXPLORE Act. This piece of legislation aims to expand access to America's public lands and waters.

Arkansas is currently being represented by Katherine Andrews, Director of the Office of Outdoor Recreation, in a partnership with Runway Group at the Sea Otter Classic in California. This event is an opportunity to elevate brand and to promote Arkansas as an outdoor recreation destination. Sea Otter Classic is one of the largest mountain biking and outdoor sports festivals. It includes a race and symposium. As a previous attendant, Commissioner Gary Vernon advocated for the continuation of the State's attendance at the event. He explained that the event consists of 70,000 to 80,000 members of our target outdoor recreation audience in one place. Kalene Griffith gave support for the State's attendance in the event, explaining that her office has sent a representative to the annual event since 2019. In addition to event representation, there will also be a hosted media and business dinner at the "Arkansas House," an Airbnb, inviting a curated guest list for an Arkansas branded experience. The timing of this event has allowed for a new advertising presence in California and layered marketing strategies such as geofencing, are being utilized to capitalize on other efforts in the California market.

Preparations are being finalized for the upcoming Arkansas Activation in Chicago. This activation is expected to expand our current presence in Chicago. A culinary video produced by The Local Palate will be shown on Thursday, May 9, to kick off the event. Past numbers have shown that Chicago is an emerging market for travel and relocation. The evening portion, No Ordinary Nights Culinary Event, will introduce 100+ invited guests and 40 media influencers and content creators to the state in a bold way, with a dinner crafted by Yeyo's Chef Rafael Rios, a James Beard Award nominee, and Nick Shoulders, an up-and-coming musician that just returned from playing at Willie Nelson's ranch. Three influencers will participate in a pre-Arkansas trip.

The following Saturday will consist of a daytime customer-facing portion of the event in partnership with Arkansas-based Gearhead. The partnership will be offering an Arkansas experience at a point-of-sale and pop-up engagement. These interactions will be utilized to build a list to follow-up with participants.

Representatives will be onsite to hand out merchandise and promote Arkansas at the outdoor activation space. In addition to these interactions, staff has scheduled media appointments and meetings in Chicago.

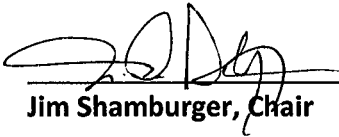
MISCELLANEOUS/CLOSING

There were no public comments.

With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 10:57.

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I acknowledge these minutes are approved:



05/16/2024

Jim Shamburger, Chair