

STATE PARKS, RECREATION AND TRAVEL COMMISSION

Village Creek State Park

May 16, 2024

APPROVED JUNE 28, 2024

Commissioners Present

Austin Albers
Blair Allen
Rebecca Baker
Bob Connell
Shash Goyal
Kalene Griffith
Eric Jackson
Weston Lewey
Jim Shamburger
Gary Vernon
Mike Wilson
Randy Wolfinbarger

Commissioners Absent

Trey Berry
Mike Gibson
Molly Houseworth-Jackson

Staff Present

Shea Lewis, Secretary, ADPHT
Suzanne Grobmyer, Chief of Staff, ADPHT
Elaine Lienhart, Executive Secretary, ADPHT
Marty Ryall, Director, Div. of AR Heritage & Legislative Affairs Director, ADPHT
April Kiser, Deputy Chief of Communications, ADPHT
Dalaney Thomas, Tourism Director, Tourism
Kristine Puckett, Deputy Director, Tourism
Kori Bull, Project Coordinator, Tourism
Susie Cowan, Industry Relations Manager, Tourism
Jeff King, Deputy Director, Arkansas State Parks
Chris Myers, Planning and Development Manager, Arkansas State Parks
Mike Wilson, Assistant Director, Arkansas State Parks
John Stewart, Region 3 Supervisor, Arkansas State Parks
Vicki Trimble, Superintendent, Village Creek State Park
William Ward, Assistant Superintendent, Village Creek State Park

CJRW

Darin Gray
Jessica Frahm
Blake Bowlin
Katherine Vasilos

Guests

Gary Jones, Jones Video
Konul Yonueva, Intern

Approval of Agenda

Chairman Shamburger asked for a motion to approve the agenda.

Mike Wilson made the motion to approve the agenda; Weston Lewey seconded, and the motion carried.

Approval of May 2024 Minutes

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

Kalene Griffith made the motion to approve the minutes; Mike Gibson seconded, and the motion carried.

Secretary's Report

Shea Lewis welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked the Commission for their flexibility to postpone the meeting that was originally scheduled for June 20. Secretary Lewis explained the reason for the delay is related to today's primary reason for meeting: the Parks, Tourism and Keep Arkansas Beautiful budget that was awarded to ad agency CJRW.

Over the past few weeks and months, much of the Department's leadership resources have gone into approval for the ad agency contract which will help promote our state and our State Park System. CJRW's proposal was well put together and includes a partnership with MMGY and the potential it holds for the state at both a national and international level. The idea is to raise the image of the State across the region, the nation and around the world.

The new contract will also allow the Department to work with CJRW on both an internal and external reset which will reflect recent changes in leadership and personnel. The Department has new perspectives and Governor Sanders has priorities about where we need to focus our energy. Katherine Vasilos from CJRW will serve as the account executive for all three budgets and she has a very strong acumen for organizational leadership and planning, which is the direction we want to go. A new alignment of how our staff will work with CJRW is also in the works and a new organizational chart will be available soon. More details will be presented during the August Commission meeting.

Secretary Lewis provided a few more brief updates:

- **Dr. Trey Berry** has regretfully stepped down from the Commission. Dr. Berry had expressed that his focus at the time must be on Henderson State University and that he hopes to join the commission at July's community tour while in Clark County.
- **Arkansas Forward Process/McKenzie Process Update:** This initiative came from Transformation and Shared Services Office at the direction of Governor Sanders. It is a review of State Operations. ADPHT is in phase II and our review starts next week. We are already working on the Arkansas Forward Initiative and have shared information but; the deeper dive begins in July.
- **Biennium Budget: FY26-27.** Jami Fisher is leading the budget process and is striving to plan appropriately for appropriations/flexibility. The process will look at appropriation changes related to work and recommendations of this Commission, especially in regard to the Tourism Development Fund. This process usually happens in July/August of each year, prior to the full session in January and gives the department time to draft any legislation needed.
- **Employee Reviews:** The HR review process of all full-time employees has been completed. All full-time employees will receive a 3% market adjustment to salaries and are eligible for a 1% or 3% merit increase.

- **Shealyn Sowers**, Chief of Communications, has moved to the Department of Agriculture. The Department will work on filling this position.
- The **Arkansas Graveler** is underway this week with today being the final day. The Arkansas Graveler is a gravel bike race stretching from Northwest Arkansas to Jonesboro. A full report on the event is expected to be presented at the July meeting. Secretary Lewis met with the bike participants in Northwest Arkansas earlier this week and at the Ozark Folk Center State Park yesterday.
 - 300 participants
 - Riders from 35 states and several countries including South Africa and Japan.
- **ANCRC**: The approach to ANCRC was slightly different this year in that the Division of State Parks and the Division of Heritage requests were combined as one, to provide more options for flexibility for the overall money received.
- **Memorial Weekend Tornadoes**: Northwest Arkansas was impacted by 10 tornadoes Memorial weekend; Bentonville, the Kohler area, and three State Parks received catastrophic damage. Hobbs lost thousands of trees which will leave a permanent scar on the natural landscape. Not only does it affect the aesthetics of the community, but the event served as an interruption to the normal operation of tourism attractions and recreational facilities. Lewis expressed appreciation for those who have worked tirelessly to keep visitors safe and to restore the parks.

FINANCIAL REPORT – May 31, 2024

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

FY 2024 Year-to-Date Revenues were:

- Parks Division Operating Revenue - \$31,791,305 an increase of 9.64%
- War Memorial Operating Revenue - \$1,495,181 an increase of 35.31%
- 1/8 Cent Conservation Tax Revenue - \$43,552,505 an increase of 1.8%
- 2% Gross Tax Collections - \$23,878,707 a decrease of 6.07%

FY 2024 Year-to-Date Expenditures were:

- Parks Division (including Construction and Grants) - \$101,805,989 an increase of 7.79%
- Tourism Division - \$20,698,486 an increase of 6.45%
- War Memorial - \$1,567,138 an increase of 10.32%
- Department Total - \$124,071,613 an increase of 7.59%

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

Kalene Griffith made the motion to approve the financials; Weston Lewey seconded, and the motion carried.

STATE PARKS DIVISION

Director's Report

Jeff King, Deputy Director, thanked everyone for joining and shared the following high-level project and event updates that occurred since the May SPRTC meeting:

- Memorial Weekend TORNADOS: Three (3) Northwest Arkansas parks sustained damage during the Memorial weekend tornados. Hobbs State Park-Conservation Area sustained significant damage with thousands of trees downed, facility and trail damage, and one guest injury. It took several days to make roads passable and to restore power to the Visitor Center and other facilities. Several trails are still closed due to the downed trees. Cleanup efforts are ongoing utilizing parks personnel from nearby parks, volunteers, six (6) sawyers from the Arkansas Forestry Division, and an eight (8) person AmeriCorps team.
 - 989 trees down on Monument Trails with 63 tread impacted root balls.
 - 647 trees down on Hidden Diversity Trail with 33 tread impacted root balls.
 - Overall, more than 2,000 trees down on the trail systems.
- Future efforts to get Hobbs' trails back up and running include:
 - Commercial tree cutting services, tree salvage and contracted trail improvements.
 - Renting a scissor lift and towable manlift to remove hanging limbs at facilities and paved trails.
 - Continue coordinating volunteers to assist park staff in clearing of trail facilities.
- Withrow Springs State Park also sustained significant tree damage to campgrounds and select property of campers along with park-wide power outages during the tornados but no facility damage. The swimming pool and all but four (4) RV campsites have been reopened but the tent camping area remains closed due to downed trees.
- Bull Shoals-White River State Park sustained tree damage to campgrounds and select personal property of campers, park-wide power outages, minor facility damage, and significant tree damage to the day use areas. Power was restored quickly and clearing of day-use areas is ongoing in advance of the July 4th holiday.
- Memorial Day Revenue:
 - Overall occupancy for the (3) nights was 83.27%, a decrease of 1.94% over FY23.
 - Lodge Occupancy was up 1.67% over the previous year.
 - Cabin Occupancy was down 6.37% over the previous year.
 - Camping Occupancy was down 2.28% over the previous year.
 - Unique Lodging Occupancy was up 11.38% over the previous year. (Lake Sylvia had a 52.38% increase in camper cabin occupancy which contributed to unique lodging growth.)
- ANCRC: Arkansas State Parks' FY2025 Grant request was in conjunction with the Division of Heritage. Going forward, State Parks Division will aid in project and grant administration for the Heritage Division. The full amount of this year's award was \$30,837,956.23. State Parks' portion was \$16,520,000, which will allow funding of all Parks related requests.

TOURISM DIVISION

Director's Report

Dalaney Thomas reported that the eclipse impact numbers are now available. The month of April year-over-year report reflects an 8.5% increase in visitation, 13% increase in hotel occupancy, and a 25% increase in short-term rental occupancy. The numbers further supported the notion that the eclipse audience wanted to be immersed in the state's outdoor amenities. There was a 79% increase in visitation at the Buffalo National River and a 2.3% increase in Hot Springs and Garland County. Overall, there was an 11% year-over-year increase for communities in the path of totality and a 5% increase for the remainder of the state.

The evaluation of the Regional Tourist Association program's rules and processes continues. Recommendations for changes will be made at the July meeting for approval before taking the recommendations to the legislature.

Thomas reported that the Tourism Division led four strategic listening sessions across the state. Through these sessions, leadership was able to connect with industry. The sessions were described as engaging and informative for biennium planning. Chairman Shamburger expressed that there was no negativity from the industry in these sessions and that they approve of what we're doing. There were recommendations for an updated industry outreach system so that industry leaders can stay informed on state level initiatives. Opportunities for cross promotions were identified.

Strategic planning is in progress with CJRW and MMGY. The transition plan from Miles to CJRW will be implemented in July to ensure the continuation of proper upkeep of the website during this phase. The website will undergo an overhaul to improve user experience, organize content, and develop itineraries to connect visitors to vendors. The next few months will consist of presenting the details of the campaign, research, planning, and the creative development budget.

Thomas presented the recommendations for the advertising budget increase for the Parks and Tourism divisions for fiscal year 2025. Commissioner Griffith expressed her recognition of the Department's accomplishments over the past six months regarding marketing and encouraged continued forward thinking. She also encouraged connecting with local legislators and informing them on a personal level about the good that is happening in the state's tourism industry.

Kalene Griffith made the motion to approve the FY2025 advertising budget for the Parks and Tourism Divisions as presented; Austin Albers seconded, and the motion carried.

MISCELLANEOUS/CLOSING

There were no public comments.

The commission was reminded of July's meeting at DeGray Lake Resort State Park. With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:10.

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I acknowledge these minutes are approved:



Jim Shamburger, Chair **07/18/2024**