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A message regarding alternatives to State Park closures

from California Parks Company CEO John Koeberer

The prospect of California State Park closures is again in the news as the State of California deals with its continuing budget crisis. There are, however, private alternatives that should be considered before closing the parks.

Increased public funding of the parks just isn't an option. The failure of Proposition 21 last November made that clear. By soundly defeating the proposition, voters declared their opposition to increasing taxes to maintain state parks as they are today. Countless surveys and actual park use demonstrate that while Californians love their state parks, they also want them managed within available resources.

The State of California has exhausted the governmental solutions to the dilemma. And so, California State Parks have no alternatives other than to close parks or find non-governmental funding solutions to sustain them. In the past, privately funded solutions have been dismissed out of hand. Today, however, no solution that would keep our state park system viable should be discarded. So, let's consider these private sector alternatives:

Close Some State Parks

As a park professional, it is difficult for me to even mouth the obvious, but some parks don't belong in the state park system. Most of these are among the smallest of our parks and lack any semblance of statewide historical, natural, cultural, recreational or economic significance. They often were added in response to political influence, when funding was more available or when state government was on an acquisition spree.

California needs an independent task force (similar to the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission) to assess which parks should be retained and which should be buttoned up and maintained until times are better.

The task force might also recommend which parks are likely candidates for adoption by non-profits, local park districts or other sympathetic entities that are able to operate and maintain them. Potential savings from this assessment could be substantial.

Private Management

Many parks could be packaged on a regional basis for private-sector management, while others have sufficient real or potential revenues to be managed on their own. Private enterprise has shown it can accrue operating savings on an average of 30 percent better than government while managing park facilities comparably.



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Under this scenario, supervision and protection (public safety, natural resource protection, etc.) of the parks would remain under the direction of a California State Parks superintendent. Depending upon need and appropriateness, functions like maintenance, janitorial, fee collection, interpretation, and limited and contracted security could be assumed by private contractors. These functions represent the lion's share of the overall costs to keep parks open.

There is significant precedent for this type of arrangement across the country. The savings (both human and financial) could be substantial and could support and manage more effectively parks still directly operated by the California State Parks.

Innovate Revenue-Generating Solutions

Many innovative, privately managed ways to raise funds are available to state parks, including: automated fee-collection at park entrances, parking lots and showers that could collect revenue 24/7 at a fraction of the cost of manned kiosks; more privately owned and managed tent cabins, park models, yurts and other popular new forms of alternative camping that could generate added revenue for the parks; and special events (concerts, competitions and spectator events) that could generate substantial new receipts for parks.

Programs and policies that encourage private investment could attract new types of tour, recreational and interpretive programs to parks while appealing to new audiences of park users. To its credit, California State Parks is now surveying tour companies to investigate more profitable ways to provide tours. A top-to-bottom review of outdated state park policies could result in substantial gains in fee collections, such as at Hearst Castle, where significant revenue is lost because of current approaches.

More revenue can be generated without additional investment by state government. In many cases, existing park concessionaires would be willing to expand their operations via amendments to their contracts, in ways that increase revenue to the state, sustain and improve upon the park experience, and preserve park values.

Challenge Concessionaires for Solutions

It is in the DNA of entrepreneurs to invent new ways to stimulate revenue. Do that by challenging state park concessionaires to propose revenue-producing ideas and programs appropriate to the parks. Private capital can be attracted for park improvements when equitable opportunities for a return on the investment are given.

Many such investments in facilities and equipment could be left in state park ownership at the conclusion of the contracts with these private companies, allowing the state parks to attract even greater fee revenue upon the contracts' rebid.



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Employ a Management Consultant

Considering that the old approaches aren't working, it's time for a fresh start. Take this opportunity to reinvent how state parks are managed and operated. Major U.S. corporations and non-profit organizations often employ private management consultants to help them conceive new approaches. By doing so, they stay competitive, vital and relevant.

Although private and public missions are different, innovative and effective management practices, policies and techniques are applicable to both worlds. There are very few governmental agencies that could not benefit from an external review and analysis.

All of the preceding private-sector approaches can be accomplished at little to no cost. They are not panaceas for the crisis facing our state parks but represent departures from past approaches. The many private park management companies now operating in public parks across the nation demonstrate that most criticisms of private solutions are unfounded.

In light of funding realities, past reluctance by the Legislature and labor to involve the private sector must be overcome if California is to sustain its state park system.

Political Will

The California State Park funding crisis has given our state the opportunity to redefine how our parks are managed in ways that will assure their quality, relevance and access for Californians now and into the future.

If we can muster the political will to welcome new ideas from the private sector, while keeping park operations overseen by California State Parks professionals, then impending closures to and rapid deterioration of the state park system do not need to be inevitable.

John Koeberer is the CEO and Co-Owner of The California Parks Company. He is President of the California Parks Hospitality Association, a trade association representing the interests of State Park Concessionaires. He is a former Chairman of the State Chamber of Commerce and currently serves as Co-Chairman of its Tourism Committee. He is a former member of the California Travel and Tourism Commission and a recipient of the California Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2002.