

Public Works Board OKs proposal for private operators of state parks

State seeking private operators for parks

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SACRAMENTO — A state oversight board on Wednesday approved a controversial proposal that could lead to for-profit companies operating in 11 state parks, including six on the North Coast.

Critics fear the action could allow these parks to be taken over by commercial interests or undermine nonprofits that are planning to submit their own bids to run the parks.



PD FILE, 2008

Sugarloaf Ridge State Park in 2008.

Despite earlier statements to the contrary, state parks officials on Wednesday said they will not seek to turn over the operations of entire parks to concessionaires.

The parks targeted include 4,000-acre Sugarloaf Ridge State Park east of Kenwood and 700-acre Austin Creek State Recreation Area in Guerneville. The state plans to bundle those two with nine other parks in an attempt to make them more financially attractive to bidders.

"We're not willing to say that we don't have the authority to enter into an RFP (request for proposal) with a concessionaire to run an entire park. Are we doing it? No," James Luscutoff, chief of the Concessions, Reservations and Fees Division for state parks said after Wednesday's hearing at the state Capitol.

The two members of the state's Public Works Board who were present for Wednesday's hearing unanimously supported giving the state the authority to seek bids from concessionaires.

Among the possible concessions are operation of campgrounds, restaurants and day-use facilities, said state officials.

Parks representatives also said they are hoping to generate what they called hybrid proposals that would combine private concessionaires and non-profit groups as a way to keep parks open.

Some critics of the state plan have said that non-profit groups would not be able to manage parks if denied the revenue that comes from campgrounds and other fee-based services.

The board on Wednesday also approved giving the state the authority to enter into an agreement with Sonoma County to temporarily operate Annadel State Park in Santa Rosa.

The action comes a day after county supervisors unanimously authorized Regional Parks Director Caryl Hart to open negotiations with the state about taking over operations of the popular 5,000-acre park.

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State parks officials are facing a July 1 deadline when 67 state parks are to close statewide as a cost-savings measure. They describe their efforts with the concessionaires as just another option to keep these parks open. They also note that the state currently has about 200 concessionaire contracts statewide.

But concerns were heightened last week when a spokesman said state parks could consider giving these private and potentially for-profit entities the right to run entire parks.

Michael Harris, the acting chief deputy director of state parks, on Wednesday described that a "miscommunication."

"There has been an unfortunate amount of misunderstanding and well-meaning concern on this subject. To the extent state parks is responsible for that, I apologize," he said to the public works board.

But that did not satisfy state Sen. Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, who last week accused the state of wanting to turn parks over to "Wal-Mart."

"The fact is, there doesn't seem to be anything in writing," Evans said Wednesday.

Evans took credit for the state's "change in policy" with regard to privatizing state parks.

"This was more than a clarification," she said.

Parks representatives said they also erred last week when they said concessionaires would only have to provide a maximum of three percent of their revenues to the state in exchange for obtaining operating agreements. That amount represents the minimum to be given to the state, officials said Wednesday.

The state will bundle Sugarloaf with five Central Valley parks for the purposes of seeking bids from concessionaires. Austin Creek will be bundled with Russian Gulch State Park in Mendocino, Hedy Woods State Park in Boonville, Westport Union Landing State Beach in Fort Bragg and Standish-Hickey State Recreation Area in Leggett.

The state estimates that each group has combined annual revenues that exceed \$500,000.

Officials on Wednesday announced that a series of workshops will be held across the state in coming weeks for "all parties interested in forming partnerships for operating a state park." That includes a Feb. 23 workshop in Fort Bragg and a Feb. 24 session in Santa Rosa.

Nonprofits do not have to go through the RFP process but are being encouraged to negotiate directly with the state. Some leaders of these groups have expressed concerns that they can't compete with a concessionaire who has the resources to operate within multiple parks, or that their own applications to do such work within individual parks will be delayed.

"What we are asking is that you give us a chance. Give us an opportunity to do what we can do," Carolyn Cathey, executive director of the Mendocino Area Parks Association, told the public works board, which consists of the state's directors of finance, transportation and general services.

Harris, in his testimony before the board Wednesday, said officials will go with the proposals that best serve the park and the public. But he said nonprofits have an advantage in the process.

"All things being equal, nonprofits have a leg up," he said. "nonprofits are rooted in the community. We value that tremendously."