

State Park System Advisory Council (RSA 216-A:3-kk)
February 2, 2021 Meeting Minutes (*Approved 06/11/21*)

A regular meeting of the State Park System Advisory Council (SPAC) held by Zoom videoconference. Chairman Gilbert called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. in accordance with the *Checklist compliant with the Right-to-Know Law during the State of Emergency*.

Attendance was taken by roll call with the following members PRESENT: Rick Blanchette/Friends of the Wapack; Dir Bryce/DNCR designee; Tom Chrisenton for Forestry; Jeff Gilbert for business; Rep Robert Harb/House; Jennifer Kennedy/Blue Ocean Society; Matt Leahy/SPNHF; John Nyhan/Hampton Area Chamber; Sen Tom Sherman/Senate; and Rep Suzanne Smith/RR&D. Rep Andrew Renzullo/RR&D Chair arrived later. Chair Gilbert welcomed the new legislative members.

Minutes: Mr Nyhan MOVED to accept the minutes of Sept 1, 2020; Mr Leahy SECONDED. The minutes were ADOPTED as written by roll call YES vote from Mr Blanchette, Dir Bryce, Mr Chrisenton, Chair Gilbert, Ms Kennedy, Mr Leahy, Mr Nyhan and Rep Smith; and two ABSTENTIONS from Rep Harb and Sen Sherman.

Advise the Director: *Director's Report.* Mr Nyhan supports the food truck idea at Odiorne and suggested having a food truck at South Beach to support the day visitor. Dir Bryce said Parks will release a Request for Information to determine the feasibility of a food truck at Odiorne. He is sensitive to the concerns from local businesses at the seacoast. Rep Harb appreciated the report and asked whether the Council had any action items. Dir Bryce said the report can include issues addressed by the Council.

Roundtable Discussion. Members discussed the use of the cottage at Rye Harbor for staff housing or as a lodging rental. Sen Sherman offered to serve as a go-between with the Town. Parks will research the property's history and present options at the next meeting.

Parks Financial Report. Dir Bryce is working with the DNCR Business Administrator to develop a forecast report in an easy format. In 2019, Parks generated \$15.3M and expended \$15.3M, including towards improvement project funding to supplement the capital budget projects. Parks budgeted \$14.9M in 2020, but brought in \$13.1M in revenue in 2020. The losses are due to COVID-19 related closures, reductions in capacities and difficulty in finding staff. Parks will reduce expenses (i.e. improvement projects and equipment) and has requested GOFERR reimbursement of COVID-related expenses. Dir Bryce expects a balance of \$2.2M and the rebuild of the Parks Fund. He appreciates the support for the state park system from legislature and Governor's Office; and looks forward to the 2021 season. Chair Gilbert said it is a testament to the Director and park staff on maintaining the park system over the past year.

Operating Budget FY2022-2023. Dir Bryce said the House response to the Parks operating and capital budgets has been supportive and positive. There is always pressure on units supported by the General Fund. As such, Parks will support the Bureau of Historic Sites and 100% of DNCR's Design, Development & Maintenance unit from the State Parks Fund. Parks' operating budget is based on its revenue goals, as an "authorization to expend."

In response to the offer to advocate for Parks' budgets, Dir Bryce said he anticipates support from the Senate. Sen Sherman agreed that Parks has strong bi-partisan support. He asked if Parks is able to obtain federal funds for infrastructure projects. Dir Bryce has provided parks improvement projects to legislature and the Governor's Office and is hopeful of support for long-term, capital investments that strengthens revenue generation, public safety and facility maintenance needs. Park staff are participating in the development of Electric Vehicle charging stations, alternative transportation modes, DOT's rail trail efforts and the seacoast greenway linkage to parks.

Park Ops. Mr Housman and Shawn Hamilton reported on park operations. Parks had an unprecedented number of visitors, especially at the hiking parks. To manage crowds and ensure public safety under COVID guidance, Parks expanded its use of the reservation system with great success and positive response from the public. Although campgrounds opened late following re-opening guidance, Parks saw a 53% increase in

revenue from the previous period covering July 1-Nov 11, with a 37% increase in occupancy for weekdays and 12% increase on weekends. Hiking parks and campgrounds are opening earlier in 2021, with reservations to many hiking parks already selling out on weekends. Camping reservations are 92% booked for Memorial Day weekend and 87% booked for the July 4th weekend.

Dir Bryce responded to Rep Smith that park openings are based upon staffing. Parks has had to hire contractors to support the seacoast's sanitation and janitorial operations. He appreciates the support of the Governor's Office for the J1 foreign student employment program relied upon by many seasonal hospitality businesses.

Food Truck concept. Retail Supervisor Grant Goulet looks forward to a great season in Parks. With increased visitation at Odiorne, he proposes a Request for Information (RFI) to determine the feasibility of food truck services. Providing food services would encourage longer stays at the park and at the Seacoast Science Center, operated by Parks' partner, and would improve traffic conditions and increase park revenue.

Northwood Meadows. A lending library kiosk was installed at Northwood Meadows as a memorial, without permission from Parks. Members agreed that a lending library would need monitoring, maintenance, and removal during the winter season. It was suggested that unless the local library were willing to provide such oversight, it should be removed. The person who installed the memorial should be referred to Parks' Memorial Bench Program.

No Turn-Away campground policy. Charlie Niebling, who chairs the DNCR Forest Advisory Board, proposed for consideration a policy that would accommodate bicycle tourists that arrive at state park campgrounds without a reservation. It is often difficult for bicyclist to know when they might reach their destination, due to unanticipated bicycle repairs, sickness, fatigue and route changes. They require little space for their tent, are early to bed and aren't noisy. If the campground is full, bicyclists would greatly appreciate being able to tent in any available area. Large bicycle tour groups would require advance planning and reservations. Mr Niebling asked if Parks would consider allowing, with reasonable limitations and restrictions, small groups of cyclists (1-4) to camp at park campgrounds on short notice.

Members were supportive of the concept. Their comments included: if space allows, fees are paid, large organized tour groups require advance reservations, and consider a pilot program. Hearing no negative comments, Dir Bryce will bring this forward and talk with park staff.

Park Fees & Fines. Mr Nyhan thanked Mr Gilbert, Rep Smith, Dir Bryce and park staff for their participation during the Fee and Fine Subcommittee meetings. Park fees are set under RSA 216-A:3-g, and are approved by the Fiscal Committee. Parks has not changed its fees since 2012. Mr Nyhan had requested a review of the park fees and the SPAC subcommittee was formed. Its objective was to review park fees and fines within the statutory framework, and to make recommendations to the full Council. The SPAC would make its final recommendations to Commr Stewart and Dir Bryce, and a new Fee Package would be presented to Fiscal Committee for approval. The subcommittee met several times, with the Hampton Area Chamber and park staff conducting a fact-finding effort using seven references for comparisons. Mr Nyhan also spoke with public officials.

Mr Nyhan, Dir Bryce and Mr Hamilton presented the fee recommendations, including a reasonable increase in fees by adding a non-resident fee; a \$1 increase for metered parking and an increase in the parking fine; adding a "premium" campsite classification, new camping offerings, non-resident camping fees and updating the camping policies; fine-tuning the function space rental fees; and increasing the non-resident fee for season passes. Phase I implementation of the fee changes would encompass all fee categories except for camping, effective for the 2021 season following Fiscal Committee approval. Phase II implementation of the camping fees would become effective for the 2022 season, due to the 11-month advance reservation timeline for campgrounds.

Members discussed the fee changes. The parking fee at Monadnock was first piloted in 2019. NH residents can opt to purchase a State Park Plate and park there without charge of the parking fee. The increase to the metered parking fine is proposed because people find it cheaper to risk a \$25 parking citation than to pay

\$10-80 for parking at the private lots located further away from the beach. Meter Patrol is not able to determine how long a person may have been parked without payment. Dir Bryce will discuss with staff about setting a separate fine from all other violations for parking without displaying a payment receipt.

An increase in camping fees are proposed for “premium” campsites, as well as an alternative fee for non-residents. The rates fall within the range for comparable campsites and yet remain accessible. Members discussed the \$10/night pet fee and supported it as reasonable compared to the cost of boarding one’s pet.

Mr Nyhan made a MOTION that the Council support the subcommittee’s recommendations for Phase I implementation of fee changes for the 2021 season and Phase II implementation of camping fee changes for the 2022 season, including all alternatives; and that Dir Bryce consult with Commissioner Stewart to bring a Fee Package forward to the Fiscal Committee for approval. Rep Smith SECONDED. During discussion on the motion, Sen Sherman AMENDED the motion by adding that the Council supports Commr Stewart and Dir Bryce adjusting the recommended fees in the Fee Package, as may be needed following the public involvement process and discussions with the Governor’s Office. Mr Nyhan SECONDED.

In response to questions, Dir Bryce said that his priorities for fee changes are, in descending order: metered parking fees and fines; Franconia Notch parking fee when the hiker shuttle is operating; changes to the premium parks list; premium campsite fees; and pavilion rental fees. Comments at the Mt Washington Commission meeting suggested that the Fiscal Committee may not support a new entry fee at Mt Washington State Park. Members discussed the timeline and resident/non-resident fee structure. Commr Stewart thanked the Council for their thoughtfulness and support of Parks. It will be important to explain the need for new rates to build support. Dir Bryce added that the basic fees for residents have not changed since 2008, that the State Park Plate and season passes provide value options, and revenue from fees help support park investments and improvements.

The MOTION with AMENDMENT is adopted by roll call YES vote from Mr Blanchette, Mr Chrisenton, Chair Gilbert, Rep Harb, Mr Leahy, Mr Nyhan, Rep Renzullo, Sen Sherman and Rep Smith. Dir Bryce ABSTAINED.

Other business. In the interest of time, Dir Bryce referred members to Tom Mansfield’s report on capital and park improvement projects. The House added more funding in HB25 for park roofing projects, which is appreciated. Contact Dir Bryce directly with questions about the reports or other materials.

Adjourn. Mr Nyhan MOTIONED to adjourn; Rep Smith SECONDED. The meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m. by roll call YES vote from Mr Blanchette, Dir Bryce, Mr Chrisenton, Chair Gilbert, Rep Harb, Mr Leahy, Mr Nyhan, Rep Renzullo, Sen Sherman and Rep Smith.

The next meeting is scheduled for Friday, June 4, 2021 at 10 a.m. at Pawtuckaway State Park. A barbeque lunch will be served immediately following the meeting.

Summary of Action items include:

1. Odiorne food truck RFI update
2. Rye Harbor cottage for staff housing or lodging rental
3. Parks Forecast Report, new & easy format
4. No Turn-away campground policy
5. Park fees & fines update

Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy