

# Pinching pennies for parks

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County exploring cost recovery options, grants

Supervisors approved exploring new strategies to help fund county parks, some that have up until now been operating solely on county funding.

At the July 22 El Dorado County Board of Supervisors meeting, Chief Administrative Office principal management analyst Jennifer Franich told the board she hoped their presentation would generate “a great discussion about all of the options for parks funding, and that we can get some meaningful feedback from all of you.”

Much of the board’s decisions that day were based on a budget that has no room for new expenditures.

Parks Manager Zachary Perras said they would address eight initiatives in the Parks and Trails Master Plan, four of them intended to be completed in the 2025-26 calendar years and the other four ongoing.

The goal is to establish cost recovery through fees to fund parks and also their renovations so that less is subsidized by the county and the parks become more self-sufficient. Perras has recently been certified in a financial sustainability certification program taught by Jamie Schaubach, a representative of the California Parks and Recreation Society.

Schaubach had been contracted by the city of Napa to address its Parks and Recreation budget crisis and developed a strategy.

"She's in continuous contact with the director of Parks and Recreation in the city of Napa, and today they've actually increased their cost recovery percentage by over 50%," Perras noted.

Some El Dorado County parks are offered to the general public for their enjoyment with no fees and are highly subsidized, he shared. Others that are providing a service to a defined group are paid for with user fees.

Henningsen Lotus Park has 100% cost recovery, according to Perras.

"It is our only park where you have to pay a parking fee, it is highly rented and a lot of people feel it's a desirable location for events," Perras said, adding that although the park's budget covers annual operations, it does not cover long-term capital replacements.

"As we carry this project forward, we're going to start making sure we have good ideas of the conditions of our assets, project out when they need to be replaced and start incorporating that set-aside into our budget," he said.

The South Fork of the American River is also 100% funded through outfitter permits and individual fees, as well as the Rubicon Trail which is 100% funded through State Off-Highway Vehicle grants, the Green Sticker Fund and a small portion through the Sacramento Municipal Utility District Fund.

District 4 Supervisor Lori Parlin asked if there were any concerns regarding keeping the grants in the future.

"Yes and no," Perras relied. "We've gotten recent correspondence as recent as yesterday and the process seems to be moving forward. We're looking at seeing when funds would be awarded."

Perras said he attended grants workshops last year to make sure the application requirements are fulfilled on the state grants. A scoring criteria is used so making sure you know what gives you points is important, he added.

Parks that have low cost recovery percentages (0-3%) include Bradford Park, El Dorado Trail/SPTC, Forebay Park, Joe's Skate Park, Historical Rail Park/Dog Park, Old Depot Bike Park and Pioneer Park, according to Perras.

"Generally speaking, these are all very low percentage of cost recovery, but also provide a very high level of community benefit," he said.

Perras pointed out the county doesn't currently have recreational programs, but in a proposed cost recovery program he said they could be added to help fund parks. He used the example of the bike park, which he had seen in other areas could be rented out to third party contractors who do bike classes for kids or summer camps.

"They would be renting one of our facilities so we could recoup some of our operating costs," he said, sharing a model that had the cost recovery at 50%.

The proposed cost recovery program also recommended charging site fees for filming in addition to the Film Commission permit fee already collected.

District 5 Supervisor Brooke Laine expressed concern that people aren't double charged and suggested staff coordinate with the Film Commission on that.

Chair George Turnboo, District 2, mentioned Pioneer Park as one location where site fees could be generated. "It's a jewel. It's a gem. It really is," he said. "They've got two baseball fields there and it would be really neat to look into it, especially softball teams."

He said Lions Park is overcrowded with teams that play there.

Both he and Perras agreed they need to advertise what's available at county parks.

District 3 Supervisor Brian Veerkamp advised that they shouldn't get involved in programs.

"That's a difficult thing to facilitate," he said.

"Rentals are great, and we can get somebody else administering the program and leave it alone," he added.

Perras assured programs would be on a contract basis with groups renting the park and handling their own programs.

“We could also do a facility use agreement that would have different terms and different fees,” he said.

“Anything we take on, for quite some time probably ... anything new we create can’t be something that’s subsidized,” Parlin said, “and that’s what we’ve been talking about all this year.”

Veerkamp also warned that the county shouldn’t count 100% on grants coming through, such as for maintenance on the Rubicon Trail, and have a backup plan.

“It’s a worldwide attraction,” he said. “It’s going to be tough moving forward and there’s a lot of constraints on government.”

Staff gave recommendations on 11 items: No. 1, to receive and file the report; No. 2, to approve the proposed cost recovery model which has goals to reach recommended percentages paid by users of park facilities.

The user categories began at 0% cost recovery for open access parks on up to 100% cost recovery for private special events. Other categories include community events, human services, education/ learn-to programs, rentals/filming and concessionaire/specialized service.

Veerkamp said he thought the education category should have a cost recovery target of more than the proposed 50%. It was decided to raise the education target cost recovery to 75%-100%, the same as rentals/filming.

In No. 3, Perras asked the board whether they wanted to hire a consultant to do a fee analysis or if staff should take a crack at it — though that would likely take more time.

“We wouldn’t be able to do it as quickly as we might have with a more robust staff,” he noted, adding, however, that a consultant would probably cost \$30,000-\$45,000.

“It seems like to me, especially with our budget, the way it is right now now, we gotta look at any way to be able to cut costs,” Turnbo said.

Franich said the length of time to do the analysis would be approximately six months with a consultant versus at least a year if done by staff. Before fees can be set, the cost of running each park would have to be determined, she added.

"We have issues with our budget," Turnboo said, adding that he needs to see the actual cost of a consultant before making a decision.

District 1 Supervisor Greg Ferrero said he would like to know the cost first.

Parlin said they need to know how much they would recoup, too.

"That's the whole thing; is it even worth it?" she asked.

In No. 4, Perras asked how often parks can be closed for private special events.

Veerkamp suggested it be on a case-by-case basis and bring it before the board if need be.

"We have been working with county counsel on where our boundaries are as far as cost recovery versus actual revenue generation, and this is one area where we could actually charge more than our costs," Franich said.

All supervisors approved No. 5, regarding reaching out to recreation programs to see if they wanted to contract to use county park facilities.

No. 6, contracting out work with a consultant to update the 2018 draft Park Impact Fee nexus study with a focus on regional recreation amenities "would apply to all building permits issued because it would be for regional amenities that are a benefit to everyone in El Dorado County," Perras said.

Supervisors agreed now is not a good time to do this, saying they could revisit it in 10 years.

No. 7 asked the board if a general obligation bond should be investigated to provide revenue for regional recreation amenities.

"I don't think this will fly with the voters," Parlin said. "If we had a very specific project that was amazing and new, and everybody wanted, then maybe."

All supervisors voted no on a new bond.

Nos. 8 and 9 were addressing Forebay Park improvements. Perras asked if staff should contact the Sierra Nevada Conservancy for the Prop 68 grant "and speak with one of their representatives to determine if our Forebay Park renovation project is eligible for submission. And if given approval, we would like to submit a conceptual application in the amount of \$500,000 to be used for the unfunded portion."

Another grant Perras asked supervisors for direction on is the Land and Water Conservation Fund grant program in the amount of nearly \$1.9 million.

Earlier this year the Forebay renovation project, which originally was to be funded with \$3 million, lost \$2 million in county budget cuts. These grants would make up for that, Perras said.

Franich said if they got both grants, all four phases of improvements could be done at the park.

Laine said there is a problem with Phase 4 of the project, with residents whose backyards are backed up to proposed basketball and pickleball courts being concerned about noise levels.

"I would like to see this project go forward, but my question is, are we locked into that location?" she asked.

Franich said the board could give them new direction on the location of the basketball and pickleball courts, but then they won't have California Environmental Quality Act approval for that specific project, so there may be additional costs.

"I would totally support that 100% as long as that caveat is in there," Parlin said. "We need that moved away from the residents."

Supervisors agreed to take Phase 4 out of the grant application, which would lower the grant award to approximately \$1.4 million.

No. 10 was a request to submit a pre-application to the Wildlife Conservation Board Grant Program to be considered for a planning project to complete engineering for the Chili Bar site plan that will be coming before the board in the next month or two. Four draft plans had been prepared by a consulting engineering firm, Perras said.

Perras admitted it was putting the "cart before the horse," but once supervisors chose the alternative they prefer for Chili Bar, "this would give us the authorization to seek grant funding to get the civil engineering design done," he said. Supervisors agreed he should pursue the grant.

No. 11 asked if staff should engage in conversation with the American River Conservancy about Chili Bar fees and to discuss eligibility of the Chili Bar project with grant program representatives from the State Parks Division of Boating and Waterways.

“One of the hurdles that we have to work through is ... American River Conservancy administers the park so they administer the parking fees,” Perras said. “But, State Parks Division of Boating and Waterways has certain criteria for cost of fees you can charge to access a park.”

ARC charges in excess of what the state allows and that makes the project ineligible for grant funding, so they would have to work with ARC to get them to lower their parking fees, he explained. Supervisors approved the recommendation.

The next board of supervisors meeting will be held 10 a.m., Tuesday, July 29.