



# CALIFORNIA LEAGUE OF PARK ASSOCIATIONS

*Partners in park sustainability, education and advocacy!*

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## **CALPA Responds Favorably But With A Few Concerns to Parks Forward Commission Final Report from January 2015**

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The following information is submitted as a response from the California League of Park Associations (CALPA) to the Parks Forward Commission's final report and recommendations for the restructuring of the California State Parks System.

CALPA is the umbrella organization (founded in 1983) for the non-profit partners referred to officially by the California State Parks (DPR) as Cooperating Associations. The organization is comprised of 73 of the 89 cooperating associations throughout the state, in addition to other nonprofit park partners like the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation which do not function as cooperating associations, and individual members who share in the organization's mission to advocate for the development of the nonprofit partnership with California State Parks to promote park sustainability and education.

Cooperating Associations were developed as nonprofit arms for California State Parks going back decades. They support their parks in a number of ways and in a number of different configurations. Some organizations support a single park by providing financial support for educational programming, while others may support a single park with a broader support of staffing specific functions, funding maintenance, major capital projects, and the like. Still others may serve as concessionaires in addition to their nonprofit role. Other organizations may serve several state parks in a county or region, providing support in a variety of ways. The organizations vary in size and capacity.

CALPA organizations provide substantial support to California State Parks both in the amount of funds they donate or invest into their respective parks (nearly \$13M in 2013 and over \$150M since 1997), or with the number of volunteer hours that they provide at these parks. Volunteer hours are spent on park maintenance, special event and

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**Wayne Breece**  
Cooperating Association  
Program Manager  
*California State Parks*

project staffing, educational programming, and the like. Over 32,000 individuals from these organizations donate their time.

The magnitude of these roles have increased dramatically since the financial crisis and threatened closures which began in 2008. Many of the cooperating associations were directly responsible or assisted in preventing closure of their respective parks. Some cooperating associations even assisted other parks and organizations to prevent their closures at the height of the crisis.

CALPA, as an organization, agrees with many points made in the Parks Forward Commission's report. First and foremost, major changes within the California State Parks system are absolutely necessary. Cooperating Association members are also keenly aware of the need to develop financial sustainability. Our organizations have been operating alongside California State Parks in crisis mode for far too long, and a long-term, sustainable solution needs to be developed. In addition, CALPA agrees that embedding a group on the inside to make the changes necessary is the only way these changes will come about. And finally, the call for the inclusion of younger generations and ethnic groups is also a point on which we agree with the commission's report.

With those points of agreement as starting points, there are several points that CALPA would like to make regarding the report. One of our concerns as park partners is the lack of visibility of nonprofits in the report and in the general discussion of parks. As our role as partners to keep our parks open has drastically increased over the past several years, we would anticipate that our role in the new transition would also increase. We believe that this is something that would add a great amount of public confidence to the plan, given the role of the nonprofit partners in helping ward-off park closures and service reductions since 2008. The transition team that the report calls for does not contain members of the park partners who played an important role in preventing park closures. We firmly believe that members of nonprofit partners, and other organizations, should be included as members of this transition team to ensure that we have a place at the table when it comes to the revamping of the California State Parks system.

One request of CALPA is to find a way to even the playing field of parks across the state, by providing consistent levels of service and representation with headquarters in Sacramento. While some cooperating associations and their parks enjoy a very good relationship with their district staff and are in constant communication, some have little or no communication with local staff or have an adversarial relationship.

A majority of Cooperating Associations are revenue generators for their parks. This role has become even more prevalent during the economic crisis. Our current placement within DPR, is with the office of Interpretation (Education). Many of our members feel that this placement needs to be reconsidered given our strong financial role. As the focus on the Parks Forward report indicates, a move towards revenue generation is crucial. As park partners already engaged in the revenue generation process, we feel that aligning our organizations with the department's own revenue generation department would be a good strategy. This would bring into focus our current contributions to the department and focus on our ability to generate revenue in ways that the department cannot. Given the right staff to support us in our endeavors, the partnership between state and nonprofit revenue generation could be very successful. In

addition, CALPA requests the addition of a new deputy director in state parks focused on the nonprofit partners within the parks system to provide our organizations a more visible role in the co-management of our parks.

The commission's call for a new nonprofit is of some concern to us. The role of our organizations alongside this new nonprofit is still very unclear, and it is unclear to us that a new nonprofit would be beneficial. There are currently many nonprofit organizations serving California State Parks in a variety of ways. We would like to ensure that a new nonprofit organization does not dilute the revenue generation pool and add an additional layer of bureaucracy but instead works closely with the existing partners. Although we welcome the opportunity to work with a new entity that focuses on addressing unmet needs, we propose that developing already existing organizations and realigning them to focus on the needs and ideas outlined in the Parks Forward report appear to us to be a more realistic solution that would result in more effective results, more quickly.

In closing, our suggestions include the following:

- Given the significant role that cooperating associations played in sustaining their parks through the economic crisis, Cooperating Associations need to be given a place at the table for transforming the California State Parks system into a sustainable system that is not operating in crisis mode.
- We feel that a mechanism to even the playing field must also be put in place to ensure that all districts are providing the same level of service to local parks and park partners.
- Given the significant financial support that cooperating associations give DPR each year, the cooperating association function should be realigned with an area focused on Revenue Generation rather than Interpretation, with a new deputy director appointed to focus specifically on the nonprofit partners.
- Cooperating Associations need support from DPR with individuals who have business savvy, understand how a nonprofit business functions, can help advocate for our organizations, and understand the different roles that DPR and nonprofits can play, in an equal partnership. We propose the further development of existing nonprofit partners in lieu of a new nonprofit entity, but we stand ready to work with the new entity in further supporting our state park system.

As long-time park partners, supporters, and advocates, we look forward to the opportunity to provide input to help improve and preserve our California State Parks for future generations.