

Effort under way to overhaul California State Parks

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

California officials on Monday launched a new program to analyze and overhaul the state parks system, to be led by a volunteer commission.

Called Parks Forward, the effort is required by the California State Parks Stewardship Act, passed last year in the wake of a financial scandal that upended the leadership ranks at state parks headquarters.

The system has been under scrutiny since the Bee revealed last year that top officials at the Department of Parks and Recreation hid \$20 million in "surplus" money even as they set about closing 70 parks due to budget cuts.

Among its other troubles, the department has a deferred maintenance backlog at its 280 parks that exceeds \$1 billion.

That is partly because the state general fund subsidy for parks has declined over the past 20 years, and revenues from visitor fees have not filled the gap.

California Natural Resources Secretary John Laird said Monday that Parks Forward aims to make the parks department "sustainable" over the next century.

"We would like to get to a point where we are not deferring maintenance and we are adequately funding the stewardship of the parks," he said.

Laird will appoint the commission members, to include park users as well as experts on conservation and finance. The only commissioner named so far is Lance Conn, a venture capitalist and former investor for Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen.

Conn vowed to confront the “brutal facts” about state parks operations and funding. He said the commission will produce a report by the end of next year. The process will be public and will draw from examples of park management around the nation and world.

“I love California parks, and I love tough problems,” Conn said. “We’re not going to toss the report over a wall and sneak away under cover of darkness. We’re going to stick around and see that the measures are implemented.”

Many of the problems confronting California’s parks system have been studied for years and are well understood.

The Parks Forward initiative, for instance, follows a Little Hoover Commission report released in March that recommended a number of operational changes. Among them was the idea of divesting some parks, to reduce operating expenses, and turning them over to other entities, such as local governments.

Carrying out such ideas, however, is fraught with controversy.

“I don’t know that any of us know the right steps to get us there,” said Carolyn Schoff, president of the California League of Park Associations, a coalition of nonprofits that assist individual parks. “But I think all of us know there needs to be a paradigm shift.”

Parks Forward will be funded by grants from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation and others, under the auspices of the Resources Legacy Fund.