

A Washington State Parks retrospective, 2005 to 2012

On March 2013, Washington State Parks will turn 100 years old. A few years ago, the park system was on a modest roll, with stronger budgets that supported growth and improvement. All that changed when the Great Recession hit. Now, programs gone or withered, 200 full-time employees smaller, parks staffed seasonally, the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission is out making the case for more than zero state support. 2005 seems a long time gone.

At this writing in the winter of 2013, we have taken stock of our situation. With a new fee program not meeting projections, we're doing our best to keep on keeping on. We know we can operate at current levels through June of our birthday year. But who knows what lies beyond? One thing we know for sure: We're in uncertain times.

People ask us all the time: "Are you still having a Centennial celebration?" Our answer: "Darn right we are."

We're not dead yet. In fact, we're proud of what we've accomplished during the Centennial decade – and that we've managed to hold things together in these very tough times. That, in itself is worth celebrating – even if we have to do it pot luck.

What follows is a retrospective designed to tell you a little about who we are, where we've been and where we're working to be, as we enter our second century -- beyond 2013.

Setting the stage: A bit edgy even when times were “good”

In the spring of 2008, when it was announced that a new network TV comedy sitcom called “Parks and Recreation” would premier that fall, groans were heard around the leadership table at Washington State Parks.

The director and other members of the team, some of them lifelong parks and recreation professionals, imagined the worst: caricatures of government employees portrayed as buffoons and playing out ludicrous scenarios in the style of the painful “mockumentary-style” comedy, “The Office.” They assumed the show would lampoon all of the parks and recreation world – just at the time we were seeing progress on our efforts to raise the profile of our professionalism and services.

As it turned out, the show didn’t cause the feared comparisons. It was a silly-fun show that didn’t invite true comparisons. In customer satisfaction surveys that next year, the public gave us the high rating we were hoping for – a solid B-plus. Our concern about such an innocuous event as a TV comedy, goes to show how sensitive we were and how tenuous we felt our situation to be.

We didn’t know they were the salad years!

The 2007-09 budget cycle we were in had given us the strongest budget in years, at \$135 million Operating (not counting federal, grant and dedicated funds) and about \$50 million Capital, as the result of support by Gov. Gregoire and the Legislature. Both Operating and Capitol budgets were allowing us to get facilities and services upgraded and to begin to make modest improvements after years of decay.

Understand, it didn’t feel like we were rolling in money, but it did feel like a departure from years of budgets the Commission had characterized as “just adequate.” Our history was one in which we would roll along at “adequate,” then every few years there were serious reductions that wiped out whole programs or made big changes (seasonal partial closures in the 1980s, loss of an Interpretive Division and Scenic Rivers program and establishment of a ‘blue ribbon panel to consider park closures’ in 1990s; lease cancellations by parks owned by the federal government in 2002).

Each reduction caused public upset and put us further behind. Because of restricted budgets for the previous two decades or more, maintenance had been deferred again and again, and old roads, outdated sewer and water systems and structures had been failing, causing health and safety risks and seriously compromising the quality of services. A 1999 Proviso outlined the need, but things continued on as before – until those mid 2000s, when we started to be able to address some of the worst cases and look ahead to new revenue-producing projects such as campground upgrades and roofed accommodations. Just prior to the turn of the new century, we had made the shift to arming rangers – with a momentary outcry by some, but overall, a move that was appreciated by a public seeking safety even in the out of doors. We were growing some, and we were growing up.

Creating optimism: Centennial 2013

The progress of the mid-2000s was partially due to the Commission's Centennial 2013 initiative. In 2003, State Parks leadership had identified an opportunity on the horizon to celebrate 100 years of parks – and to use the decade to build, improve and expand the park system and services. The Commission – a volunteer citizen board appointed by governors to set policy for the park system and hire the Director – had adopted the Centennial 2013 Vision of a system of parks “of uncommon quality, outstanding for the experience, enjoyment and education of all people.” The vision would help us build public and legislative support for future budgets. It would guide our work over the subsequent decade as we prepared for a “grand birthday celebration” and beyond that, a second century of parks.

The Commission and agency already had begun to do more educational outreach in the early years of the new century, with some marketing efforts, strategies on funding options and exploring new, more business-like practices to help deal with the historical restrictions of our budgets. Centennial 2013 solidified and expanded that effort, and a higher profile for State Parks and its mission led to more solid financial support. Legislative tours, editorial boards and more than 100 speaking engagements by the director, staff and Commission, to chambers of commerce, tourism groups and business organizations began in 2005. A State Parks Foundation was created to help build support through donors and outreach. The focus of these efforts was to show and tell the story of state parks and to focus on the value of the park system to citizens – and to suggest what the park system could become. The campaign was branded with sunrise colors, to evoke optimism and a positive future. The Centennial 2013 effort started with defining a vision statement, based on our agency mission:

State Parks mission

The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission

acquires, operates, enhances and protects a diverse system of recreational, cultural, historical and natural sites. The Commission fosters outdoor recreation and education statewide to provide enjoyment and enrichment for all and a valued legacy to future generations.

Centennial 2013 Vision

Washington state parks will be premier destinations of uncommon quality, including state and regionally significant natural, historical and recreational resources that are outstanding for the experience, health, enjoyment and learning of all people.

Following adoption of the Centennial 2013 vision, the Director drew staff from across the state together to lay out a work plan, then set forth 11 Centennial goals, all focused on improving the quality of parks and services.

In 2005 Gov. Gregoire elevated the effort by signing a proclamation supporting the Centennial 2013 effort. The Centennial 2013 Legislative Advisory Committee was created; that group helped to identify the first priority of Centennial 2013: “Fix what we have,” a focus that seemed to resonate with the Governor, Legislature and the public. Within a few short years, State Parks made significant progress on every Centennial goal.

Results included better stewardship and publically approved land-use plans in most parks; an increase in events and interpretive programs; growth of volunteer hours to 350,000 annually; business plans for parks; trail and park improvements. Park projects called “100 Connections” were getting done a few a year because of park managers working with local organizations and communities. At this time, Governor Gregoire’s Clean Water Initiative also provided some funding to help upgrade water and sewer systems in about 20 state parks located on Puget Sound.

Another mark of success came in the middle of the Centennial 2013 decade. In the midst of a strong economy, a years-long effort to secure a new home for State Parks headquarters finally succeeded. It was a necessary move that provided a shot in the arm for agency morale.

The old Parks Headquarters was a stand of second-hand military pre-fabs set in place near the Olympia airport in the early 1970s. They were intended as a temporary fix to last no more than 10 years. But the ups and downs of state budgets had never been “up” enough to support a building for Washington State Parks. By the late 1990s, the buildings in the small headquarters complex were leaking from ceiling, wall and floor. The employees in one unit felt compelled to pull tarps over their computers at night when rain was forecast. One day when it snowed, the ceiling came down on an employee sitting at her computer. A moldy smell permeated some areas, and blown fuses were a common occurrence. Worse yet, the structures had become habitat for wildlife – namely, rodents and ants. Thousands of ants (yes, picnic ants) hatched each spring in the light trays directly over employees’ heads.

Olympia staff knew they weren’t the only ones with these types of struggles. The agency had been picking away at park office upgrades and park housing as it could, for years. Just two years before, Eastern Region staff had finally gotten approval to move to a building without mushy, caving-in floors.

These upgrades represented agency pride for many staff. Commissioners noted the incongruity of having a Centennial plan so focused on quality when, as one Commissioner put it, “We’ve got our employees working in slum conditions.” The Centennial effort and upgrades helped the agency get beyond what some depicted as a “victim” or “poverty” mentality and placed the focus on continual improvement.

Dark clouds on the horizon

Just as the headquarters move was under way, news of major economic upheaval for the country began to surface. There was brief concern about the horrible timing of moving into a new building at a time of impending doom. But the legislature had allocated the funding for the new building a full year or two before, Parks and General Administration had spent years working out the details, and the lease was signed.

The layoffs of 2009 and 2010 hit Olympia staff hard, as elimination of programs and staffing there were part of a strategy to take substantial cuts at headquarters first, followed by regions and field in descending order. It was a traumatic year for many, as people changed jobs, moved families, switched supervisors or prepared for a departure. There were no leaks on our roofs, but there were dark clouds aplenty as we struggled to make the changes and figure out how to keep services going.

People who worked at State Parks between 2008 and 2010 likely remember the long series of e-mails from the director and executive leadership team. They were titled, "The Economy and Our Budget" and were numbered 1 through 28. Every couple of weeks there was another, and staff opened them with dread. While they were intended to keep everyone informed as much as possible, they were a constant reminder of the bad news of the times. Yet, even those who complained about them asked when the next one would be sent.

"We decided as an executive team that we would do our best to keep our staff apprised of what was happening with our state and budget so they could plan their lives," recalled Director Don Hoch, who at the time was a region director on the executive team. "We knew everybody was hearing scary stuff on the news, and the Director and Deputy were hearing more of the details and possibilities in cabinet meetings. I remember we talked about not wanting to scare people but also wanting them to understand what might be coming. Sometimes we didn't really even have the details yet, and we'd just shared again what we knew from the last note, just to make sure people knew we were going to keep in touch with them. "

The agency followed the governor's early lead and, in summer of 2008, put equipment purchases on hold, reduced administrative and program funding and staffing in headquarters, eliminated concession subsidies and transferred some parks to other governments who were able to keep them open. In 2009, we eliminated 34 positions at headquarters, transferred several parks and consolidated regions from four offices to three, also making savings by moving Southwest Region staff into the headquarters building to save on energy costs. About a dozen new park rangers, still in probationary status, were laid off and the positions left vacant; we could not afford to send them to the law enforcement academy, knowing there was a good chance they could be laid off later. Vacancies all around the agency were left open, seriously affecting capacity everywhere.

Director and Deputy regularly attended cabinet meetings and were well aware that every agency had its own extreme challenges. Agencies were in midst of reducing and eliminating programs that they had worked hard to build. Valuable employees were being lost through layoffs, and people's lives were being affected. It was a refrain heard from Gov. Gregoire, who frequently would say, "I do not like my budget," but made the hard choices that needed to be made. Not the way anyone would want to end a career.

All the things we are

Before we go any farther with this story, we should probably stop and tell you who we really are.

Washington's state park system is one of the largest systems in the country with 117 parks and 120,000 acres. Of these, 75 are camping parks.

It is one of the most naturally diverse in the country, with parks in each of the state's nine eco-regions (Northwest Coast, Puget trough, North Cascades, West Cascades, East Cascades, Okanogan, Canadian Rockies, Blue Mountains and Columbia Plateau.).

Older than NPS: And it's one of the oldest state park systems in the country, established in 1913, four years prior to the National Parks System.

Donated property: Over the years, some 40 percent of the property in the system was donated by citizens around the state, as families, organizations and institutions wanted their precious land to be enjoyed by all.

State Parks has an average estimated 40 million visits a year, with most of those visitors – 93 percent – visiting by day.

33 heritage sites and more than 700 historic structures: These State Parks-managed sites include interpretive centers, native pictographs and petroglyphs, turn-of-the-century military forts, pioneer and Victorian homes, lighthouses, historic military forts with gun emplacements; and historic events sites (Lewis and Clark encampments, etc.) as sites that show off geologic sites.

Unique destinations, including Goldendale Observatory, with one of the largest telescopes in the country; Cama Beach State Park, a rehabilitated historic fishing resort on Camano Island; a petrified forest at Gingko-Wanapum near Vantage in Central Washington – where you can learn about and see evidence of Ice Age floods; the limestone Gardner Caves at Crawford State Park in the state's northeast corner; and one of the best land-based orca-sighting spots anywhere, at Limekiln State Park on San Juan Island. Speaking of San Juan, State Parks is primary host in Washington's San Juan Islands, which feature moorage buoys and docks for boaters, as well as on-island hiking trails, restrooms and primitive campgrounds.

Roofed accommodations: For those who don't want to drive an RV or sleep on the ground, State Parks offers cabins and yurts – round canvas-covered structures set on a wood floor, with heat, lights and beds inside. Other roofed accommodations include vacation houses – lighthouse keepers' houses at Cape Disappointment, Victorian officer's houses at Fort Worden and Fort Columbia – places of history furnished with modern conveniences, for a reasonable price.

State Parks' "linear parks:" State parks manages hundreds of miles of cross-state trails, rails-to-trails with surfaces to allow hiking, bicycling, horseback riding and winter recreation – and water trails for kayakers and sailors, with camping stops along the way.

Winter recreation and boating programs: State Parks is also the administrator of Winter Recreation programs for motorized and non-motorized recreationists, with funding from Sno-park fees to cover grooming cots. Federally funded boating programs are administered by State Parks, with emphasis on safe boating and clean-vessel programs to protect resources.

State Parks' Stewardship program manages forest health, using the work of two statewide arbor crews. Stewardship also manages the Seashore Conservation area – the sandy beaches from the mean-high

water mark to the uplands and dunes along 60 miles of ocean beach. Science-trained staff help conserve habitats and identify appropriate uses in parks.

The State Parks Planning team has completed 93 comprehensive land-use plans in parks, with robust public input and approval by the Commission. Most of our constituents come to us through these highly participatory planning efforts.

State Parks' capital programs include an architect, an archaeologist, a historic preservationist, a cartologist, as well as engineers, ecologists, botanists, biologist, land-use designers and real estate professionals.

Many trades and professions: Besides the interpretive and law enforcement ranger that the public may automatically associate with state parks, the agency's programs also include people in a variety of trades – everything from fine carpentry and construction to masonry, mechanical, plumbing, electrician and landscaping, among the agency's maintenance specialists. Like other agencies, fields of budget analysis, accounting, marketing, communications, graphic design, IT tech, Human Resources and program management are represented.

State Parks' ongoing drama – budget, budget and budget

Because of the recession, State Parks' financing base has changed radically in the last five years. A fast and dramatic shift away from mostly allocated dollars to a budget based mostly on dollars yet to be earned, has created great uncertainty.

For decades, General Fund comprised the largest percentage of the agency's operating funds, at 65 to 80 percent in allocated dollars for operations. In 2007-09, State Parks received 66 percent of its \$135 million total budget (not including federal, grant and dedicated funds) from general tax dollars. Approximately 25 percent was provided in the budget as projected spending authority for dollars we would need to earn in order to spend – fees for services such as camping, watercraft launching, moorage and non-recreational leases and concession income.

In 2009-11, as the result of recession, State Parks' General Fund allocation dropped to 30 percent of its whole budget, and the spending authority/projected revenue portion rose to 40 percent. The Legislature revamped a State Parks Donation program tied to vehicle license registration to an "opt-out" approach to help offset losses, but the program did not meet projections.

In 2011-13, State Parks; General Fund allocation dropped sharply, this time to only 12 percent. This was when the Legislature adopted the Discover Pass to help offset funding losses. Now the spending authority portion of the budget – the portion that needed to be earned before it was available for planned expenditures – was up to 77 percent of total budget.

The job of the Governor and Legislature these past few years has not been easy. With state revenues falling behind program costs and an absolute necessity to balance the budget, there were few good answers. State Parks began in 2010 to seriously scope out the possibility of a new access pass, seeing no

other way to make up lost General Funding and keep operating. We have tried all sorts of approaches to lighten our financial load in order to live within our budgets.

Lesson: Efforts to lighten your load can result in heavy baggage

That included the 2009 business of considering park transfers. In working its 2013 Vision, the Commission had set out to have a system made up of parks of “uncommon quality and of statewide and regional significance” – parks with a real “wow” factor that would draw people from across the state or from out of state. We had many very special and wonderful parks that did not quite fit that profile. Most, but not all, were day-use parks, and at the time, with no day-use fee, they generated little or no revenue.

But there was a subjective aspect to the issue, as well. There were parks that had not yet undergone a full planning effort to see what they might become; at the time, they seemed more in character with the type of park that a county or city might run. The Commission determined it would propose transferring about 13 of such parks to local entities, so long as those government entities were willing and financially able to keep them open for the public. At the time, prior to Discover Pass, State Parks was prohibited by law from charging a day fee, while counties and cities did have that option. If those entities could not keep the park open for public use, it would revert back to state ownership.

It was not new for State Parks to consider transfers, but previously the transfers were done to accommodate cities whose urbanizing boundaries had overtaken the perimeters of state parks. In the 1990s, for example, Mukilteo State Park had gone to the City of Mukilteo, and Moses Lake State Park had been transferred to the City of Moses Lake. The cities had simply grown up around these small parks that looked and felt like city parks anyway.

While the 2009-10 transfers worked out okay in some cases, the effort created controversy that many would say was not worth the public angst or the expenditure of resources to address. Successful transfers included Wenberg State Park to the City of Snohomish, which promptly did begin to charge a day-use fee in addition to the camping fee already in place there; Fay Bainbridge and Fort Ward to the Bainbridge Island Metro Parks district; Fort Okanogan to the Colville Tribe; and Osoyoos Lake Veterans Memorial Park to the City of Oroville. All had found ways to afford the parks’ continued operations.

Other cities and counties simply could not afford to take on more parks. The fear and real possibility in these instances was that the park on the transfer list could close if no one could take it. In some areas, neighbors came out of the woodwork to persuade State Parks to keep the park in the system. Every park in someone’s back yard is their park, and every park in a legislator’s district can be deemed “out of bounds” for savings through closure. Part of this is because local economies suffer when parks close – an important reality for Washington State Parks. We are essential to economies. In many small communities especially, if the park closes, the businesses die.

This claim, often delivered emotionally by community members, was supported empirically in a 2002 study on economic impacts of state parks on the economy in Washington – a study that the Commission

will update when funds become available. Dean Runyan Associates of Portland, Ore., cited in its study that visits to state parks yielded a total annual economic contribution of \$1.1 billion and \$34 million in state tax receipts in the year 2000; that year, overnight visitors spent an average of \$29.80 a day in communities surrounding parks, while day visitors spent \$15.70 a day.

In short, talk about closing people's favorite parks, and you're going to make enemies. The other tough reality is that people never forget the phrase "closing parks." It's as though once the term is uttered, it's never forgotten. In 2012, we kept parks open through extreme efforts, knowing we needed to keep building support for Discover Pass – and yet some people still think we closed parks.

The flip side of the transfer-closure discussion: Help carrying the load.

So strong was this feeling of community-park ties in Montesano and Elma that people there got organized, big-time. When we started talking about the option of transfer and it was clear their local governments could not take the parks, people in those communities pulled together an amazing friends group effort that continues to the present. Schafer and Lake Sylvia state parks are the regular beneficiaries of these citizens' amazing efforts. They raise money to help cover utility costs, they do regular cleanups and events in the park to get people to come – and they pre-purchase Discover Passes to sell in their own FOSLS (Friends of Schafer and Lake Sylvia State Parks) information booth at the Aberdeen mall. They are there standing with us, helping us carry the load and ready to inspire other groups. These types of efforts really buoy the spirit of staff and Commission – but they also illustrate how integral parks are in people's lives.

During the recession-driven discussions about best ways to make savings, park closure was a big theme. We looked at lists of parks, ranked by cost versus expenditure and learned that only about 10 parks could generate enough revenue to cover their own costs. A few of them generated enough to keep a few other parks afloat. But by and large, as borne out by the experience in other states, self-sufficiency was a myth.

We kind of knew that already. Back in 2002, during a significant reduction, we had gone to federal and other landowners of several parks in Central and Southeast Washington where State Parks had assumed management. We let them know that without operating help, we would need to turn the leases back to them to operate themselves, so we could focus our resources on the state-owned properties. A public utility district and one federal agency came up with money to keep us operating, but two other federal agencies took their lands back and contracted operations out to private companies. Within two years, they were no longer operating – and lack of stewardship had left the sites to degrade.

Exploring solutions: Discover Pass

It was with this just behind us that the concept of another day access fee began. In 2010, staff and Commission started discussing it seriously, knowing it would be politically ticklish. A \$5 vehicle parking fee (\$50 annual) put in place in 2003 to balance out a budget reduction had three years later been abolished just at the time it was beginning to catch hold and bring in decent revenues. A legislator had

set sights on eliminating the fee, claiming it to be “wildly unpopular,” even though attendance was rapidly returning to pre-pass levels. The abolishing legislation of 2006 prohibited State Parks from charging a day fee. (This is when the first State Parks Donation program (the “opt-in” version) was created to help offset vehicle pass revenue losses. In 2009, when State Parks General Fund was drastically reduced, the program was changed to the current “opt-out” model, inspired by a more “difficult to opt-out” model used in Montana.)

In 2010, it was clear that even the second Donation program wasn’t meeting projections and that if General Fund was further reduced, another solution would be needed. It was also clear that efforts to transfer or close parks to make savings usually ended up costing big-time in public confidence and legislative support. (People often said they understood our need to find savings and even to downsize the system – but inevitably would expect us to close “someone else’s favorite park.”)

State Parks staff knew that Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and Department of Natural Resources, (DNR) whose recreation programs had been on the block before, were together working on a per-person land access pass they believed would work for their users.

State Parks folks kept plugging away on their own, because they believed that a per-person approach wouldn’t work as well for Parks’ visitors. Our visitor base is primarily family groups coming in a carload to use the park for a day. State Parks tested its per-vehicle concept to get a handle on the potential for acceptance and support at a price of somewhere between \$25 and \$60. Later, together around a table, the three state recreation land-owning agencies agreed the public would be best served with a single pass, and DNR and DFW shifted their approach to match that of Parks. As we worked together, it became clear that our first best way of selling passes and getting them into users’ hands would be through the already established WILD license system managed by DFW. Not long after, State Parks’ Donation Program partner, Department of Licensing (DOL) offered to help however they could. They had effectively and successfully hosted State Parks’ donation programs tied to vehicle registration.

The Discover Pass bill was signed in May, and on July 1, we had a new pass program in place. It was an amazing effort by three agencies to get a complex program on the ground in a few short weeks. We hit the ground running on July 1. Web sites were up and running, announcements made, signs up, passes in hand to sell. But it had happened so fast that most of the people coming to state lands to recreate that first summer knew little or nothing about the pass. The three agencies worked media outreach hard and saw hundreds of articles and broadcast pieces over the next months, and public knowledge began to grow. But a new public habit takes time to change.

As 2011 drew to a close, it appeared State Parks was short by some \$9 million to stay in the black for the rest of the biennium. Because of reductions already made in the agency, any new cuts would have to focus much of the reduction on the field – and yet, with a new access pass program in place, keeping gates open would be essential.

In early 2012, we eliminated the remaining Region Director positions, eliminated an Executive Assistant position, left vacant the Deputy Director position, collapsing management and placing it closer to the ground. We then shifted 66 of our 189 full-time permanent ranger positions to five-month seasonal

assignments to work the high-visitation months and hired more seasonal aides to help back up staff. We got through the summer, but stretched thin, in a situation neither desirable nor sustainable over the long term.

A winter 2013 status report

The agency is in the midst of marketing efforts that focus on the value of the state park system and the essential need to sell the Discover Pass. PR firm Weber Shandwick, on contract to help, designed a social media storytelling site to build public participation and support. The new blog site, together with the agency's other social media efforts have growing followings and seem to be increasing support for the Discover Pass. Corporate sponsor and radio campaigns were part of the general State Parks marketing plan moving into winter, with more print, radio and other marketing planned as we can afford it moving forward.

Staffing reductions made last spring were in balance with re-projections of Discover Pass revenues. Those revenues were met January through May of 2012, then inexplicably fell lower during the summer, serving to illustrate once again the uncertainty of the State Parks budget. Because of careful budget monitoring and reductions in spending, we know we're okay at current staffing levels through the biennium. Our future beyond that depends on the 2013-15 Budget: The Commission request is \$27.2 million in General Fund dollars.

In addition to reductions that must be made to live within our budget, the agency is embracing a LEAN approach and actively working to integrate LEAN into its culture. The tools are being used now to streamline work flows and processes, and increasingly, LEAN is being applied to daily decision making.

Because of the lower than anticipated revenues from Discover Pass and the continuing challenges of projecting revenues, we are often asked whether Discover Pass is a failure.

Here is our answer: Certainly not! Looked at one way, Discover Pass earned more revenue for a state park system than most pass programs around the country – and Discover Pass is still in its infancy.

We're in it for the long-haul. Even though the Commission's position is that State Parks, in the best interest of the public, cannot and should not be 100% self-supporting, State Parks remains committed to making the Discover Pass successful and working with sister agencies to improve and streamline as we go. Projecting will remain tricky, no doubt. A new business plan for the three agencies is expected to provide some help in identifying sale points and reaching our audiences for greater success long-term. Last year, the Legislature went along with our request to make the pass transferable between vehicles. This year, we are marketing the pass as a great gift idea. Next year, we'll explore broader sales platforms and gift possibilities for the Discover Pass.

Meanwhile, the "opt-out" version of the donation program – which everyone thought would lose substantial support with the advent of the Discover Pass – has remained a strong and helpful source of funding help for State Parks. Support letters and checks arrive at State Parks almost every week from people donating extra for the cause.

The future: A Transformation strategy

So Centennial 2013 was drawing nearer. Budgets were getting ever more uncertain. The public seems to want more and more out of its parks and recreation services. And their appetite is growing for technology and connection – even in the wild. During all this time, State Parks was continuing to look out over the horizon and visualize a new future.

For years, the Commission had been told to find ways to “act more like a business” – and had explored some ideas, including extracting gravel from an undeveloped agency-owned property to create a revenue stream; the potential for a private, historic preservation-minded corporation to operate a business on a Parks-owned historic property and help preserve it; and a variety of concession operations at various parks. During the beginning of the recession, the agency renegotiated leases for cell phone towers and easements to ensure the state and agency were getting market rates and periodically explored the concept of sponsorship for buildings or features within state parks.

Most recently, State Parks has been in discussion with a group or non-profit and business organizations in Port Townsend, about the possibility of co-managing Fort Worden State Park Conference Center. The huge park, originally a turn-of-the-century coast military fort, has dozens of historic buildings that together comprise a large and popular conference center. But the agency struggles with the costs of preservation, and the operating costs there do not come near to covering the site’s expenditures. The parties continue working toward a cooperative arrangement to benefit both State Parks and the organizations that operate there.

In recent years, the agency has been working on a comprehensive transformation strategy that would bring some of these types of efforts together. It would be a guiding document setting out how the agency would explore new ways to sustain the park system and its mission, with sponsorships, more and stronger partnership relationships and new enterprise approaches for the agency. The goal of these efforts would be to sustain the park system and support all aspects of its mission. A transformation strategy document is expected to be adopted by the Commission late in the winter of 2013.

The agency this past spring undertook a broad outreach effort with the public to help inform the transformation strategy. The agency has identified groups of employees to explore new revenue-generating ideas and to identify potential efficiencies. Another piece of the picture is greater use of technology to deliver services and save money.

The technology piece is partially underway. It includes expanding wi-fi for customers (which also results in greater connectivity for a park system with some sites still on old-fashioned dial-up connections).

Technology improvements include last year’s creation of a State Parks mobile web site. Currently, a new State Parks app is under development through a contract vendor. The State Parks interpretive program is using technology to expand its programming reach in an efficient and economical way. Instead of spending money on hard displays that are quickly outdated and destroyed by weather and wear, visitors will have access to on-site interpretation through their telephones.

In addition, the Washington State Parks Foundation, founded in 2000 and growing dramatically the past few years, is working closely with State Parks to provide virtual tours and other new features on its own Web site; these programs are being designed with an eye toward generating revenue that could benefit Parks and its programs.

Moving forward, the Commission also realizes that it must care for the park system we have today, while ensuring room for growth for future generations. In tough economic times, people ask why we still seek grants to acquire lands when we “can’t take care of what we have.” The fact of the matter is, our state is still growing by leaps and bounds compared to other states. We understand our responsibility to care for our well-loved and in some cases, worn-out older parks and the facilities within them – but we also need to ensure that when future generations need new parks for recreation, we keep some lands in the bank for them. It’s a part of the mission – one that American philosopher-poet Will Rodgers could connect with, in his oft-quoted line, “Buy land. They’re not making any more of it.”

Centennial moments – high points to remember

Despite the challenges we’ve been facing, we have our bright moments and fond memories to share. Here are just a few. From the past eight years:

Cama Beach State Park grand opening: In June of 2008, 2000 people gathered on Camano Island to untie colored ribbons and officially open Cama Beach State Park. A dedication ceremony featured speeches by Gov. Gregoire, tribal members, elected officials, partners and donors – the Worthington and Hamalainen families, who operated the fishing resort for decades. The dedication honored the place that had been a gathering site for tribes and later had drawn vacationing families to enjoy a quiet retreat. The families’ donations along with grants and capitol funds went to completely redo the village, which is listed on the National Historic Register. The place is regularly booked up, as modern families go there to enjoy the nostalgic feel of old times, in the rental cabins and park store.

Celebrating cultures at state parks: Several years ago, the Folk and Traditional Arts in the Parks Program began as the result of partnerships with the Washington State Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, later joined by the Washington State Parks Foundation. The cultural arts programs have provided outstanding entertainment for many seasons of park visitors, but they also served to accomplish something more: Sharing some of our Washington stories and making parks more inviting to a variety of cultural groups in our state. Events have ranged from Latino fiestas to Russian-Slavic festivals, African American cultural days, Asian celebrations and concerts and Native American cultural days, just to name a few.

Old Man House returned to the Suquamish Tribe for care: In June, 2005, the Suquamish Tribe and Washington State Parks Commission celebrated an official transfer of title. Old Man House State Park, held by the federal government for decades and transferred to State Parks in the 1950s, back to its original people, the Suquamish. They would care for the site and interpret it for the public. Celebration day included a canoe and longhouse ceremony that capped off the official decision made by the Commission the previous year. That meeting day is remembered by Commissioners as a high point.

Hundreds of public comments were considered. An estimated 300 people, non-tribal and tribal alike (some from tribes across the country) stood witness, while drummers, dancers and even three Buddhist monks from Seattle took up vigil outside to await the decision. Commissioners have said they consider it one of their best memories.

Long-distance trail expansion: State Parks is proud of the improvements it made early in the Centennial decade, to refurbish trestles and resurface trails, also acquiring new sections and working with partners on improvements for the recreating public. Examples of these are the John Wayne Pioneer Trail, which stretches from near North Bend east to the Columbia River – the Snoqualmie Tunnel recently underwent an inside tunnel resurfacing to make it more safe for passage; the 130-mile long Columbia Plateau Trail from Ice Harbor Dam on the Snake River to Fish Lake near Cheney; the 39-mile Centennial Trail, a paved trail that runs from Coeur d’Alene, Idaho through Spokane and through Riverside State Park; and the 56-mile-long Willapa Hills Trail from Chehalis to South Bend, with surfacing being added as funds are available. A continuing goal of the Commission is continue progress on a trail network by linking these to local trail systems.

Centennial improvements in every park: In 2009 and 2010, despite setbacks in the capitol budget, State Parks took stock of park improvements and found it could name an improvement in every park as the result of its improvement focus. These included some small but notable projects – and major upgrades such as Grayland Beach campground, Beacon Rock day-use area, Cape Disappointment road reconfigurations and trails, development and expansion at Pearrygin Lake and a park-wide renovation at Belfair, just to name a few.

Happy for our mission

When State Parks employees are out and about and people learn that we work for Parks, they often respond with, “Oh, that must be fun!”

We know that what they really mean is not that our work is a “walk in the park,” but that we have a cool mission. And we agree.

We believe parks are more essential than ever for people’s health, well-being and quality of life. Parks are important to economies, and they are valued places for families to reconnect. We believe that state parks are the heart and soul of Washington – and that the people who care for them – Commission, staff, friends, partners, volunteers, supporters of all kinds – are the spirit.

We know we take ourselves seriously, perhaps too much sometimes. We sometimes think of ourselves as the “Little Engine That Could.” Over and over again, we find ourselves chugging along okay with just enough fuel in the tank to make the haul on the flat – when suddenly, a huge hill appears. But over and over again, everyone on the train gets off to help push, and we somehow get over the hill to keep on chugging.

We, like everyone else, are kind of worn out by this recession. But we’re going to get up enough steam to celebrate 2013 – 100 years of a great park system – with events throughout our birthday year. We’ll

be celebrating a lot of things – all in a spirit of progress, lessons learned, experiences, survival, and determination.

We hope you'll join us.