

Governor's updated budget spares state parks

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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THIS STORY HAS BEEN UPDATED.

LAKE COUNTY – Lake County's two state parks appear to be safe from threats of closure.

That's the word from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who released his May budget revise on Wednesday afternoon.

In January, Schwarzenegger's initial budget proposal suggested closing 48 state parks – including Clear Lake State Park and Anderson Marsh State Historic Park – which gave rise to public outcry around the state.

Traci Verardo-Torres, director of legislation and policy for the California State Parks Foundation – and manager of the groups Save Our State Parks campaign – said the updated budget proposal is headed in the right direction.

“We've staved off the immediate crisis,” Verardo-Torres told Lake County News.

Leona Butts, a member of the Clear Lake State Park Interpretive Association board, said Wednesday that she was “extremely relieved” to hear of Schwarzenegger's decision.

In Lake County, the possibility of losing the two state parks triggered a local grassroots movement that included signature gathering and a trip to Sacramento.

Butts said a petition drive mounted in Lake County gathered 5,260 signatures. She said she sent in the last petitions on Monday to Schwarzenegger's office.

Verardo-Torres credited efforts like that as an important factor in convincing the governor not to close the parks.

Madelene Lyon, president of the park interpretative association, said she was thrilled to hear the news. “It's been such a big cloud hanging over us.”

Even with the threat of closure looming for the last four months, Butts said the Clear Lake State Park Interpretive Association had continued to move forward with plans for the park, including fundraising for its Education Pavilion, which will be located across from the park Visitor Center at 5300 Soda Bay Road. Anderson Marsh also has building plans, including a visitor center, outdoor amphitheater and museum.

Butts and several park supporters had visited the state capitol in April for Park Advocacy Day. There, they had received a less than enthusiastic welcome from officials with the finance department and the governor's office, who had warned them that the closure were necessary.

That admonition, and recent rumblings from the capitol's heated budget committee sessions, made it seem as if the closures might actually take place.

While the parks have been spared, there will still be deep cuts, said Schwarzenegger. One area that will be targeted is Health and Human Services. Schwarzenegger also said he plans to modernize the lottery and use it to help create a rainy day fund.

North Coast Sen. Patricia Wiggins criticized Schwarzenegger's overall plan. “This budget is based on some of the same short-sighted tricks that got us into this mess in the first place, including massive borrowing and fund-shifting, without offering a long-term solution to our state’s budget problems.”

She suggested that Schwarzenegger's lottery plan “may be even worse speculation than buying a home in an inflated housing market.”

Parks face changes ahead

Schwarzenegger's plan includes using \$11 million from the state general fund to support the parks in lieu of the park closures, said Verardo-Torres.

At the same time, Schwarzenegger is requiring the parks department to raise \$2 million in fees. Verardo-Torres explained said she was on a conference call with parks officials Wednesday afternoon, and they haven't yet indicated which parks will see fee hikes, or how much the fees might go up, but she said she believes day use fees will be affected.

Fees always contain some risk, she added, and can't be relied upon to solve all of the parks' problems which, luckily, Schwarzenegger isn't proposing.

Lyon said raising fees at local parks is “doable.”

Pointing out that everything is going up in price, Lyon added, “I don't think people are going to balk at one or two dollars more to go into the park.”

Verardo-Torres warned that the parks aren't out of the woods yet. She said it hadn't taken much to lead the governor to a “pretty dire proposal” regarding a system that is already underfunded.

She said the foundation plans to encourage the legislature and Schwarzenegger to find longterm solutions to the parks department's funding needs. The California State Parks Foundation reported that state parks have more than \$1.2 billion in deferred maintenance backlog.

The legislature also could choose to take serious action to cut expenses in a year where there is a multi-billion-dollar shortfall, as a state Senate budget subcommittee reportedly did this week in slashing funds for rural law enforcement. However, Verardo-Torres said the foundation heard almost unanimously that legislators didn't want to close state parks.

Butts said she's hopeful that the value of the parks to communities has made an impression on state officials.

The parks, she said, are a vital educational tool.

Just last week, she and her husband, DA, helped introduce 26 sixth graders from Ukiah to the wonders of Clear Lake State Park. The students camped there for two nights and worked on a variety of educational projects.

Supervisor Rob Brown, who took part in the April Sacramento trip to advocate for keeping the parks open, said he was encouraged by the news that the parks were spared.

“I think that it shows that the governor's office will listen to local residents and our efforts were actually not wasted, so I'm very happy about that,” Brown said.

He added, “Maybe we need to make another trip down there to talk to him about roads.”

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