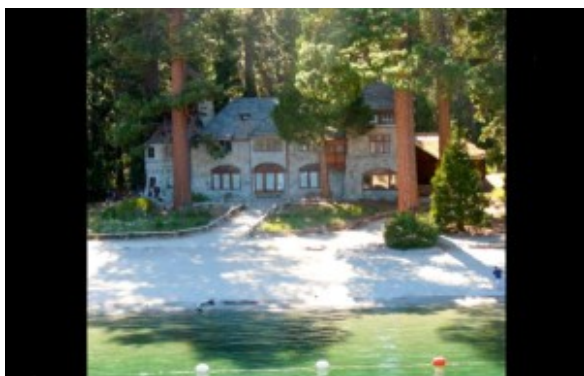


Report: State should not operate every park

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

A study released Monday by the Little Hoover Commission recommends that California should consider divesting some of its state parks and permanently turning them over to local agencies.

The 120-page report is the result of a year-long investigation that began before financial scandals emerged in July 2012 at the California Department of Parks and Recreation. Among other things, department leaders were found to be hiding \$22 million even as they moved to close 70 of the 278 state parks due to state budget cuts. Numerous other investigations have probed these events.



Vikingsholm at Lake Tahoe.
Photo/LTN file

The 14-member Little Hoover Commission, appointed by the governor and Legislature, chose to focus on long-term survival of the state parks system, the largest in the nation.

“We felt it was more important to push harder on everything else that needs to be done,” said Stuart Drown, the commission’s executive director.

The commission found that the parks department is burdened by an obsolete management structure; it can't raise enough money from visitor fees to replace cuts in funding from the state general fund; and land acquisition using voter-approved bonds has outpaced maintenance budgets.

"A great public institution is falling apart," commissioner Virginia Ellis said in a statement.

The most controversial of six recommendations calls for appointing an advisory council to decide which parks have true "statewide significance" and which serve more regional or local needs. Those in the latter category should be transferred to local agencies.

The primary reason is that the department, heeding voters' wishes, used bond funds to add 168,000 acres to the park system since the 1990s. But operational funding declined, partly because of general fund cuts by the governor and Legislature.

As a result, today there is a maintenance backlog in the system that exceeds \$1 billion, and many of the state's finest natural resources and historical treasures are in severe decay. Interpretive programs and park ranger staffing have also declined.

"The growth curve for the department is no longer in acreage, but in deferred maintenance," the report states.

It commission recommends other reforms, including adding a new job classification of "park manager." This would allow employees other than park rangers, who must have peace-officer training, to oversee a park.

It also urges the governor and Legislature to commit to a consistent level of general fund support for parks, and to allow parks to keep more of the money they generate locally. The department should also commission an independent study of

crime trends in the parks and hire more park rangers accordingly.

Carolyn Schoff, president of the California League of Park Associations, was pleased by the study but said the idea of eliminating parks from the state system will be controversial.

“Certainly we want to keep our park system intact,” she said. “But if this is a recommendation that will keep the parks as open and available as they were intended to be, I think it’s a possibility.”