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Idaho state Parks won't be shuttered for now

The agency will cut 25 positions, mostly from its Boise headquarters, for a savings of \$1.1 million.

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Gov. Butch Otter and Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation Director Nancy Merrill said Friday they can cut taxpayer spending by \$4.5 million next year and keep the agency that runs state parks.

"We will remain the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation by changing our management philosophy and operating more like a business," Merrill said.

She said a business plan for each park will be given to the governor by Feb. 1.

"Our goal is to keep the parks open and protect programs and access," Merrill said.

By the time Otter presented his budget to the Legislature, his plan to save \$10 million by moving oversight of the state's parks to the Department of Lands and selling the park agency's headquarters on Warm Springs Avenue had become what he called "conceptual."

He gave Merrill and the parks board a chance to find a way to keep the agency - and it was their proposal that was announced Friday.

In addition to cutting the employees, the agency plans to get \$2.5 million from the RV Registration Fund and \$1.4 million from available cash balances.

The RV money comes from a fund that has been collected since 1985 to pay for projects to benefit RV facilities in the state. The board that oversees the fund agreed to cut its grants by \$2 million a year for two to three years to help the parks department get through.

Money collected from increased fees will help replenish the \$1.4 million in cash reserves.

Parks will still get \$1.6 million in taxpayer funds this year, but Merrill said the agency will try to sell some of the 15 acres surrounding its building and eventually wean itself off of state support.

"The idea is to become self-sustaining or lessen the impact this agency has," Otter said.

Merrill said fees are likely to increase by \$1 at many parks, and a \$35 yearly pass will cost \$40 dollars. She said the fees are still a great entertainment value compared to other attractions, such as the movies. Otter said the fee increases will be made park by park.

"It's really important to us that we don't out-price our families," Merrill said.

Merrill said her department will depend on volunteers and seasonal workers to keep services at parks.

While the state of Arizona has been forced to close parks to meet its shortfall, Otter said his plan keeps all the parks open.

He received immediate praise for his decision.

"We're pleased the governor is taking a softer approach to this issue," said James Piotrowski, president of the Idaho Council of Trout Unlimited. "We still have concerns over the long-term management of Harriman and all our state parks, but by keeping the Parks Department in place, we have time to assist the state in coming up with a permanent solution."

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