

## Otter unveils plan; fees expected to keep parks open

By Ben Botkin - Times-News writer | Posted: Saturday, January 23, 2010 1:25 am

BOISE — Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter and Idaho Parks and Recreation Department Director Nancy Merrill announced on Friday plans aimed at shifting the agency’s dependence away from the state’s general fund and making Idaho’s parks more self-sustaining through business plans tailored for each park.

The multifaceted plans include a combination of fee increases, layoffs of 25 agency employees, and a fundamental shift that looks at each park’s revenue and resources through a business perspective.

For Magic Valley’s Thousand Springs State Park, and others in Idaho that faced possible closure, the plans offer a hopeful signal as the state looks for ways to deal with revenue shortfalls. The plans, which would save an estimated \$4.5 million, will still require legislative approval.

“We will have the same parks and we will be open,” Merrill said. “The goal is to keep our parks open.”

Otter stressed that his intent was never to close parks. The plans also show that Otter’s administration is backing away from the idea of folding the parks and recreation agency into the Department of Lands.

“We’re not shutting down any,” Otter said of the parks.

The proposal also means looking at changes such as raising campsite fees by \$2 to \$3; and raising the price of driving into a park to \$5, from \$4 now.

Otter and Merrill said the individual uniqueness of each park’s revenues and assets will be considered in the business plans. That includes areas like use of volunteers and how much the fee increases should be.

Prior to the announcement, the agency had identified the shuttering of Thousand Springs State Park as a way to balance its budget amid the economic downturn that’s caused state revenues to plummet.

Magic Valley legislators welcomed the announcement as a step in the right direction.

Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, said the governor did a good job of listening to concerns and coming up with an alternative to folding the Department of Parks and Recreation into another agency.

“Those parks that are economically viable and show economically positive impacts to the community and can generate the revenue necessary — those will certainly be safe,” said Cameron, co-chairman of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee. “For now, it doesn’t look like there will be any elimination of any park, but I know down the road as they start to move toward being self-sustaining, if there’s a park that’s not carrying its weight, they’ll have to figure out ways to become more economically viable.”

Rep. Stephen Hartgen, R-Twin Falls, said the proposal strikes the right balance in helping the state’s budget and preserving the parks.

Community members interested in preserving Thousand Springs will certainly continue to have input in the park’s future, Hartgen said.

“This is a very good start,” Hartgen said.

Sen. Chuck Coiner, R-Twin Falls, said: “That’s a relief that it’s not going to be closing down.”

Rep. Donna Pence, D-Gooding, said that there will still be a need for the volunteer group that’s been meeting to discuss ways for helping Thousand Springs.

“An ongoing cadre of volunteers will have be kept going so it can be successful,” Pence said. “It appears that Thousand Springs will remain as a park.”

“I think it’s really good news,” said Rep. Wendy Jaquet, D-Ketchum. “It is a function of government to have parks and recreation. His goal that it be almost self-sustained is a good goal.”

Most of the agency’s 25 employees that are being laid off will come from the agency’s headquarters.

The agency’s plans will be presented on Feb. 1 to JFAC.

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