

State parks back to square one after defeat of Proposition 21

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By Paul Rogers

California's famous state parks and beaches -- hobbled by reduced hours, crumbling facilities and short staffing -- are facing another bleak year after this week's resounding defeat of Proposition 21.

In the wake of Tuesday's vote, park closures are a possibility in 2011, state parks director Ruth Coleman said. In an interview with the Mercury News, Coleman also said her department is studying higher entrance fees, corporate sponsorships and other funding options.

"We don't know if we can avoid closures," Coleman said. "It's our last resort. We hope there are people who are willing to step up and help us."

Environmental groups spent \$7 million and ran TV ads statewide for Proposition 21, which would have imposed an \$18 vehicle registration fee to provide a windfall of cash for ailing parks. They saw the measure -- with its promise of \$500 million a year -- as a new permanent funding source for parks, protected from the year-to-year rollercoaster of the state's general fund.

But voters gave the measure a strong thumbs-down.

It failed 58 to 42 percent, winning in only 10 of California's 58 counties, nearly all of them in the Bay Area.

"You've got a really crummy economy, and voters are being asked to do a lot," said Mike Sweeney, executive director of the Nature Conservancy in California, which helped lead the Yes on 21 campaign.

"Support for state parks remains high. People want to see them funded. But I think people thought this wasn't the mechanism for it."

In the past two years, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed closing 220 of the state's 278 state parks -- including Henry Coe in Morgan Hill, Mount Diablo in Contra Costa County, Angel Island in San Francisco Bay and Año Nuevo in San Mateo County -- to help close the state's budget deficits.

He reversed course, however, after receiving a deluge of public complaints. Instead, the state reduced hours at more than 150 parks.

Those will continue into next year, Coleman said. Also, state park rangers and lifeguards are still being furloughed three Fridays a month to save money. And the parks now have a \$1.3 billion backlog of leaking roofs at visitor centers and historic museums, cracked plumbing in campground bathrooms and potholes in roads.

In recent years, the Schwarzenegger administration has steadily raised camping and entrance fees to reduce the amount of money going to parks from the state general fund. Pitching a tent at Big Basin Redwoods State Park in Santa Cruz County now costs \$35 a night, for example, up from \$12 in 2002.

It will be up to Gov.-elect Jerry Brown to make the final call on whether fees will go up again. Parks officials say they are anguishing about the possibility.

"It's one of the issues that's got to be on the table," said Coleman. "But we can't just say we're going to charge everybody \$60 a day per person like Disneyland. Parks are for the public good. They are supposed to be the place everybody can go. We can't make them too expensive."

An estimated 80 million people visited the 278 state parks last year, more than visited the top 10 California amusement parks combined.

Wendy Nelson, a spokeswoman for the No on Proposition 21 campaign, said people voted against the \$18 DMV fee -- even though it would have given all Californians free admission -- because of the tight economy, but also because it wasn't fair.

"It would have hit a single mom of three in the Central Valley, where there are no state parks, the same as a guy in Monterey, where there are lots of state parks nearby," she said.

The No on 21 campaign only raised \$74,000. Nelson said its top funder, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, was worried about a "camel's nose under the tent," where vehicle registration fees would become the norm.

"What's to stop the Legislature to say 'We did it for parks, let's do it for libraries or community colleges?' " she asked.

Many funding ideas, such as corporate sponsorship, commemorative license plates or voluntary donations, only can raise a few million dollars a year, a small amount compared with the roughly \$400 million annual operating budget for state parks.

One option to explore could be an opt-out program on vehicle registration forms, in which motorists would be charged unless they check a box saying they don't want to pay, similar to a program in Washington state, said Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, chairman of the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee.

"We are truly teetering on the brink of irreparable harm to our parks and probably some widespread closures," he said. "This is what's lurking out there."

A positive note from the campaign, said Ruskin Hartley, executive director of Save-the-Redwoods League, is that more than 700 groups, including tourism organizations, health groups, film organizations and chambers of commerce, endorsed funding parks. That coalition might be able to help find new solutions, he said.

"This was the golden bullet. It didn't work," Hartley said. "But there are a range of alternatives we need to look at. Some are short-term fixes, and then we need to build toward a longer-term solution. The problem is not going away."

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