

Editorial: State parks system still has a long way to go to overcome scandal

By the Editorial Board

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California State Parks has been under new leadership for more than a year, after the “hidden funds” scandal shredded its public standing.

Parks Forward, a commission established by the Legislature to make recommendations for an overhaul, will come out with a report in April.

With so much turmoil and turnover in the agency in the last few years, the question now is how long it will take to rebuild the department so that we have a California state parks system focused on public enjoyment and preservation of the state’s natural resources and history.

Parks Forward already has pointed out that, even under new leadership, many financial problems remain. Financial information still is difficult to obtain, is not consistent across divisions and doesn’t match with the governor’s budget. Budget gimmickry continues, such as holding positions vacant and using the money to fund operations.

And recent stories in The Sacramento Bee on the Bridgeport Covered Bridge on the South Yuba River and on the Empire Mine State Historic Park in Nevada County call into question whether the department can do timely emergency repairs on one hand, and think big about the future and finish long-term projects on the other.

The 235-foot Bridgeport Covered Bridge is the longest single-span wood-covered bridge still surviving in the United States (after the 2011 loss of New York’s Old Blenheim Bridge). It is on the historic wagon route from Marysville to the silver mines near Virginia City in Nevada.

For that one-of-a-kind resource, it is lucky we are in a drought. That’s because countless observers in the last three years have said that this bridge is in imminent danger of collapse if there’s significant snowfall or high water flow.

In August 2012, the department was finalizing the project so it could go forward last September. Now, it is waiting to do construction until this September. That is a big gamble that could result in total loss of this historic treasure. With a dry year, why not get crews in there now and stabilize the bridge?

Retired Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Anthony Jackson took over the parks department in November 2012 with a welcome “do it now, get it done” attitude that promised to cut through bureaucracy. The Bridgeport Covered Bridge is a test of that resolve.

Then there is the Empire Mine State Historic Park, the oldest lode mine in continuous operation in the United States from 1850 to 1956. For years, state parks and nonprofit groups have been working toward opening the main mine shaft for public tours. Visitors would be

transported by electric tram so they could experience historical hard rock mining in California and see first-hand the daily life of the Cornish miners who worked deep underground.

Now, the millions of dollars sunk into tunnel work and tracks have been scuttled with Jackson's decision to permanently end the project. The publicly stated reason was safety, because of beam corrosion. But many dispute the safety issue and have publicly called for an independent engineering assessment.

The larger issue is whether the shameful backlog in deferred maintenance in the state parks system should stop the agency from pursuing big, long-term projects that would enhance the visitor experience – especially in places where the parks system has capable partners, as it does with the Empire Mine Park Association.

The department is still trying to restore confidence among park supporters as well as users. It hid \$20 million in a secret reserve fund at the same time it was claiming that state budget cuts were forcing it to close as many as 70 parks. Director Ruth Coleman resigned, other staff members at headquarters were fired or reassigned, and Gov. Jerry Brown brought in Jackson to right the ship.

In December 2012, Jackson told The Bee's editorial board that his biggest priorities were to "win public trust" and to come up with a strategic vision for the next 20 to 30 years that would be "feasible and executable."

More than a year into his tenure, the California state parks system still has a long way to go.

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