

Editorial: Keep parks open with license fee

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California may have to rewrite its "Official Visitors Guide 2009." It invites people to visit redwoods, sea coast, mountains and historic sites in the most diverse state park system in the world.

But Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed eliminating all general fund support for state parks beginning in July 2010. That would result in 223 of 279 state parks closing.

Since the parks charge fees, closing most state parks also would mean losing about \$100 million of \$125 million a year that state parks currently collect from the public and concession operators.

The Schwarzenegger administration seems to believe that you can simply shut the gates and reopen them "when the budget improves." They're in la-la land. Closed parks will go feral – expect graffiti, fires, illegal camping, dumping and crime.

Further, the Schwarzenegger administration believes that closing parks would not have a significant economic impact statewide, because people will spend their recreational dollars elsewhere. That's true as far as it goes.

But particular communities would suffer disproportionate impact. For example, in Toulumne County, Railtown 1897 accounts for an estimated \$15 million in tourism revenue. Closing that park would save the state \$300,000 a year, but would devastate local businesses.

In Sacramento, the Downtown Partnership and the Convention and Visitors Bureau believe that closing Sutter's Fort, the State Capitol Museum, the Governor's Mansion, the Stanford Mansion and the State Indian Museum would have a huge impact on tourism.

It's time to revive the spirit of people such as Duncan McDuffie, a businessman who championed a California state park system in the 1920s. McDuffie said: "Next to our fertile soil, California's greatest single asset is the opportunity it offers for outdoor life." He concluded: "It would seem to be sound business for the state to see that its major opportunities for recreation and enjoyment of the out-of-doors are left open for the use and enjoyment of both its citizens and its visitors."

So what's the alternative to zeroing out the California state park system?

Some have suggested raising fees. But the parks have done that four times in this decade, and attendance declined.

Others have suggested that state parks should use volunteers. But the parks already have 17,000 volunteers – and only 3,000 paid staff.

The parks have also partnered with the private sector to provide services and raised millions from private sources to supplement public dollars.

But none of these options can fully replace the \$140 million from the general fund.

We'd like to see legislators revive the idea of former Assemblyman John Laird of **Santa Cruz** to increase the vehicle **license fee** by \$10. In return, any car with **California** license plates would get free entrance to all state parks.

If Republicans who signed a "no new taxes" pledge could not stomach a mandatory fee, make it a voluntary check-off every time motorists register a vehicle. A similar proposal in **Montana** passed a Republican legislature and was signed by a Republican governor. About 75 percent of **Montana** motorists voluntarily pay.

If 75 percent of **California's** 28 million motorists voluntarily signed on, that would raise about \$210 million for state parks. That would entirely replace the state's general fund contribution of \$140 million, plus allow state parks to catch up on a big backlog of repairs.

California should not be so entirely void of vision that state parks become playgrounds only for those who can pay large fees – or closed off to the entire public.