

## State's parks find an advocate

### Group hopes public will demand funding

By **Shaun McKinnon**  
The Arizona Republic

Arizonans overwhelmingly support state parks and open spaces and believe such areas contribute to a region's economic health, but few people understand how the state pays for its parks, a new survey says.

That lack of knowledge could imperil a parks system already weakened by budget cuts if lawmakers don't hear from enough voters who want open spaces protected, according to Arizona Forward, a newly organized group that commissioned the survey.

"Nothing is stronger than grass roots, with people calling their elected officials saying, 'This is important to me, I want my parks to be open,'" said Diane Brossart, acting director of the group. "But I think we take these things for granted, and until there's a crisis, people are not engaged with the issues."

As part of its first project, Arizona Forward wants voters to tell state legislators to stop raiding the parks-system budget and support a dedicated and secure funding source for parks and wildlife protection. The group is also backing changes to the state trust-land system that would allow Arizona to preserve more open spaces in the future.

Among the organizing members of the group are marquee businesses such as Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold; Wells

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#### State's parks find an advocate

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# Parks

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Fargo; the law firm Fenmore Craig, Gammage and Burnham; Arizona Public Service Co. and Salt River Project, as well as Arizona State University, the Arizona Heritage Alliance and the Nature Conservancy.

Organizers say they will focus initially on bringing together various interests but will advocate on statewide issues when there is enough agreement among its members.

Reflecting its membership, the group is trying to draw a stronger connection between parks and economic growth, enlisting businesses to help spread that message. The chairman of the advisory board is from the business sector.

"By forming a coalition, we can collectively make our voice heard," Brossart said. "We don't represent any single stakeholder interest or special interest. We can help educate, work together and bring people from around the state."

Arizona Forward was modeled after Valley Forward, a group Brossart has directed since 1991. Valley Forward has brought together businesses and cities in metro Phoenix to address sustainability issues, with an emphasis on providing information rather than lobbying elected officials.

The new group chose parks and open space for its first issue initiative. Budget cuts have battered the state parks system in recent years as lawmakers slashed the budget and raided other funding sources, including revenue from admission fees.

The parks system has been funded with a combination of user fees, general-fund appropriations and money from grants and sources such as the Heritage Fund, money set aside by voters from the lottery.

The Legislature cut the entire general-fund appropriation this year and swept the last remaining money from the funds it could reach, including the Heri-

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## PATRICK GRAHAM

Executive director of the Nature Conservancy in Arizona

tage Fund, which will no longer provide money for parks. That leaves user fees, a few smaller grants and money from individual park partnerships.

Two of the state's 30 parks—Oracle and Picacho Peak—remain closed, five others are closed one or two days a week and 14 are open only because the state received support from other sources, such as cities or non-profit groups.

The state parks department has kept its most popular locations open with direct funding, including Kartchner Caverns, Alamo Lake, Lake Havasu and Slide Rock, the park outside Sedona that posts some of the highest attendance figures in the system.

Operating without state support are parks such as Boyce Thompson Arboretum and five state historical sites.

As part of the campaign, the group hired WestGroup Research to survey Arizonans about parks and open spaces. The survey of 429 people found that:

» 92 percent believe that parks and open spaces are essential to the state's tourism economy.

» 86 percent visit parks at least once or twice a year, and 41 percent visit weekly or monthly.

» 74 percent say parks and open spaces are important to them personally, and 71 percent say parks are important to the overall economy.

Yet only about 18 percent of those surveyed say they fully understood how state and local parks are funded, even with the high-profile budget cuts and park closures.

"A depressed economy has impacted parks negatively at every jurisdictional level," said Kurt Wa-

dlington, the Tucson building group leader for Sundt Construction and chairman of the Arizona Forward advisory board. "Multiple land ownerships and funding mechanisms add to the complexity of parks issues, which can be confusing and sometimes controversial."

Arizona Forward has produced an issue paper that provides details about the various levels of parks and open spaces, from state and local parks to federally managed lands.

The group distributed the first batch of the papers at a parks and recreation conference in Tucson last week. The paper highlights the economic value of parks, citing a 2007 study by Northern Arizona University that concluded visitors to state parks produced more than \$266 million in economic benefits and supported 3,347 jobs.

A separate study by the U.S. Interior Department found that federal lands in Arizona, including national parks and recreation areas, supported 21,364 jobs and contributed about \$2 billion to the economy.

"That's not normally what people think about when they think about state parks," said Patrick Graham, executive director of the Nature Conservancy in Arizona, the only conservation group to sign on as a charter member of Arizona Forward. "A lot of times the issues related to nature or the environment are portrayed as amenities, but the reality is they are integrally tied to our economy. That's particularly true in rural Arizona, which is the area suffering more than others. State parks provide tax revenue, retail sales, jobs."

Graham said parks need more vocal supporters when elected officials start looking at budgets and revenue. "Regardless of what the polls say, it was the voices they heard at the Legislature that determined what got saved and what didn't," he said. "I think we have to step forward and make the case for a strong state park system."