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COMMENTS TO THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY BOARD
BY WARREN MEYER
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I appreciate the opportunity to provide comment and input to the National Park Service's Second Century Campground Strategy.

My company, Recreation Resource Management (RRM) operates 150 public campgrounds and recreation areas, many of these within the US Forest Service (USFS) Granther-Thye concession program. In that program, we manage all aspects of the campground's operations – from gatehouse staffing to bathroom cleaning to maintenance. We do so entirely with the user fees paid in these campgrounds while paying the USFS an agreed percentage of revenue that can run as high as 20+%. Under this program, the concession fees we owe to the USFS are generally retained in the local recreation area to perform capital maintenance. This full fee retention has been a great success -- vanishingly few of the 1000 or so US Forest Service concession-operated campgrounds run by NFRA members have the deferred maintenance issues found at many other public campgrounds.

From our decades of experience operating public campgrounds, we believe this sort of private operations model could be a useful tool for the NPS in managing and improving its campgrounds. But before I discuss what this model is, I need to say what it is not – it is not privatization. We operate these campgrounds within *very* strict guidelines – no structures can be added or modified, no new services initiated, and no living thing may be disturbed without the explicit permission of our agency partners. Our partner agency determines the use and access and character of the recreation area, and it is our mission to provide excellent visitor services consistent with these guidelines.

I also want to clarify how I am using the word “concession.” In the past I have found that this word has a very specific meaning within the NPS, and includes a lot of history around LSI and detailed contract formats that the NPS may or may not want to pursue in the future. I will use the term “concession” much more generally to mean any sort of structured recreation land lease that is made in exchange for a percent-of-revenue lease payment and where all the concessionaire's costs are paid by visitor fees rather than by appropriated funds.

So with that, I want to discuss briefly three ways in which private companies like ours can bring real benefits to the NPS campground program:

- We can provide excellent customer service at reduced cost
- We can operate smaller campgrounds efficiently and can be a marketing partner to smaller parks
- We can bring private capital to mitigating deferred maintenance and/or expanding visitor services

Excellent Customer Service at Reduced Cost

Operating public campgrounds is essentially all our company does. Our management process, our systems, our hiring, and our training are all geared to just this one thing: providing great visitor service in campgrounds and doing it for low cost. Take the campgrounds we operate for the USFS around Sedona, AZ for example. We are able to charge campers just \$22 a night -- \$11 if they have an America the Beautiful Access or Senior pass; we pay 15-20% of these revenues as rent to the USFS; we have over 40 people who live and work right in the campgrounds; we keep up with all necessary maintenance and are able to make a bit of money for ourselves; and every single facility we operate in the area has over 4.5 stars out of five on every customer review site from Recreation.gov to TripAdvisor.

A few years ago the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) did a study called “A Tale of Two Parks” (you can Google it to see the original) where they compared the economics of two adjacent public parks in the Sedona area – one run privately, by our company RRM, and one run by Arizona State Parks. Despite having nearly identical facilities and very similar annual visitation and visitor revenues, the concession-operated park covered all its expenses with visitor revenues AND paid \$54,000 a year to the USFS, while the state-run facility had deferred maintenance and ran a \$115,000 annual deficit.

We Can Offer a Lot to Smaller Campgrounds and Parks

The biggest misconception about private campground operations is that we business people just want to build a McDonald’s in front of Old Faithful. I hope I addressed that above. But the second biggest misconception is that we are only interested in the largest, busiest campgrounds. This is not at all true. In fact, after I introduce myself to any agency, the first question I ask them is “tell me about your problem campgrounds.” In nearly every agency we work with, the first (though not the last) campground we manage for them is usually the one that is about to be closed.

Those of us who learned the campground management business in the USFS are quite comfortable with smaller campgrounds. Few of the campgrounds we operate have even 100 spaces, and the typical USFS campground we operate might have 40-60 spaces at most. Sure, we would love to operate the NPS crown jewels in, say, Yellowstone, but we are ready to add value in many of the NPS’s small to medium size campgrounds. Starting in these smaller locations with a private operations program might be a low-risk way for the NPS to prove the concept and reap some immediate benefits.

When running a campground in one of the NPS’s smaller parks, we immediately become a marketing partner for that park. We mentioned our ability to keep costs in line, but we also have the ability to increase campground visitation. At six campgrounds we run for the TVA within their dam preserves, we increased campground visitation two and a half times in less than five years without being allowed to make any changes to the facilities (other than to clean and maintain them better). To our minds, one of the best solutions for overcrowding at the largest NPS parks is to educate Americans that great, underutilized alternatives exist, perhaps even closer to their homes.

We Can Bring Private Capital to Public Lands

In 1970, it would have been hard to find much difference between a public and a private campground, except perhaps the public campgrounds were in nicer locations. Today, that has changed. Private campgrounds are full of new facilities, from utility hookups to cabins to equipment rentals, while most public campgrounds have hardly changed at all in the last 50 years.

We fully understand that public lands agencies have a deeply-held ethic of providing the public a natural experience and are thus skeptical of additions to campground amenities as overdeveloping the land. However, let me offer a couple of different perspectives.

First, I believe the NPS is in serious danger of losing relevance in its campgrounds with many important demographics that I know the NPS has goals to attract. Young people don't want to own a gas-guzzling RV. People of color are very under-represented among RV owners and tent campers. And it is really hard to get an urban kid away from the computer screen and into the woods directly via tent camping, which is intimidating to novices. There needs to be some sort of gateway experience to get folks into the outdoors, and we have had great success on public lands with cabins, yurts, pre-positioned RV's, and pre-pitched tents to attract new sorts of visitors. (As an aside, we have even added electrical outlets at tent sites – if you want to attract more young people to tent-camping, let them plug in their iPhone).

Second, I believe it is a false dichotomy that campground development is always a zero-sum tradeoff with a natural experience, as I think they can be complementary. Sticking with Sedona as an example, we operate a great campground called Cave Springs right on a creek in a red rock canyon. It's a perfect natural experience except it sounds like a truck stop all day from all the RV generators running. My company has petitioned the USFS for years to allow us, at our expense, to electrify these campgrounds. This work would have almost no visual impact, but it would suddenly make the campground peaceful and quiet. And it would be wildly popular with visitors, as electrification tends to be the #1 amenity they request.

Over the last 10 years our company has invested millions of dollars in improving public campgrounds for agencies like the TVA, California State Parks, Alabama State Parks, and Michigan State Parks. In these projects we have refurbished deferred maintenance, added utilities at campsites, added new campsites, installed cabins, added store and laundry buildings, added boat slips, and many other improvements (all made with full advanced approval of our agency partners). Exhibit 1 at the end of this comment includes before and after pictures of one such refurbishment.

Perhaps our most demanded project is to add cabins or yurts to an existing campground. In some of these projects we have taken over the operation of the campground, but in others the agency has just leased 10 or 20 campsites to us and allowed us to place, maintain, and rent cabins on those sites. This has been a big win for many agencies, as they get – without investment or need for new staffing – a great new amenity for the campground as well as a stream of concession fees that typically are more than they were making before on the bare camping space.

And while this sort of private capital could easily be deployed with NPS LSI provisions, such provisions are NOT necessary. In fact, we do not have a single contract with any sort of similar

guarantees. We make these investments only with the promise of a longer-term contract of 15-30 years to recoup our investment, and at the end of the term, or even before the term is up, ownership of the improvements is transferred to the agency.

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Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Second Century Campground Project. If I ever can be helpful to your effort, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Warren Meyer', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Warren Meyer
President

EXHIBIT 1: Example Private Investment in a Public Campground

TVA Honeycomb Campground, before:



TVA Honeycomb Recreation Area, after:

