

Response to Parks in Focus DRAFT Recommendations:

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Visit Southeast Montana greatly appreciates the Parks in Focus Commission and its massive undertaking. We commend the work the Commission completed and eagerly await the next steps for Montana State Parks.

We agree that “One Vision, One Agency” is crucial to move Fish, Wildlife and Parks forward, first internally as noted, and then to all of Montana as the brand *The Outside Is In Us All* takes root. In regard to regional tourism growth, we feel aligning Parks with FWP regional administrative boundaries streamline many functions. Additionally, updating the classification system of Parks, according to experiences, will make way for the myriad improvements necessary, as will expanding and enriching staff to cultivate leaders.

Regarding Recommendation II. Strategy 2. (Build internal systems and processes on page 4), we strongly feel that the “three state parks to pilot the implementation of classification...” should include at least 1 state park in the eastern third of Montana, with Makoshika State Park being a strong candidate for a pilot program. It is the largest park in the system, receives more than 94,000 visitors annually and is strongly supported by the local community, local CVB, regional tourism and state tourism, plus it is poised for growth.

Additionally, Makoshika already employs the “Open for Business” culture as defined by Recommendation III. Strategy 1. (on page 5). In fact, Makoshika’s manager frequently “seeks partners to generate revenue and enrich the park experience” during collaborative efforts with Visit Southeast Montana.

Lastly, under Recommendation IV. Strategy 3 (Secure More Funding, page 8), Visit Southeast Montana proposes great caution regarding the bed tax. According to the organization’s Board-approved Public Policy, Visit Southeast Montana “Defends Lodging Tax” and “Opposes any changes to lodging tax that reduces funding of tourism promotion and marketing.”

While the recommendation notes “Explore an increase (in the 3% portion of the tax that goes to the general fund) for development of “destination” parks that would pay economic dividends for Montana businesses and communities,” opening this funding mechanism to scrutiny could backfire on all (including in-state) tourism and thus should be avoided.

Again, we thank the entire Commission for a job well-done and look forward to the future of Montana State Parks.