

National Parks Offer Opportunity to Next U.S. President

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By [Tom Secunda](#)



The next U.S. president will face the challenge of bringing two parties together following a polarizing election campaign and years of partisan gridlock. It will be no easy task, but small victories are possible to achieve quickly, and our national parks offer a golden opportunity for the next president and Congress to get off on the right foot.

The National Park Service just celebrated its 100th birthday last month. Democrats and Republicans alike extolled the virtues of our parks, which are in blue and red states, rural areas and big cities. But despite strong bipartisan public support, the parks are in trouble. They face two major challenges that both parties -- and the National Park Service itself -- have failed to address for too long.

The first is funding. In [2015](#), the NPS employed fewer people than it did in [2000](#), even though Congress created more than two dozen new national parks and monuments during that time and the number of visitors increased by [21 million](#). The parks also face a \$12 billion [backlog](#) in repairs. As many visitors can attest, roads and other critical infrastructure are crumbling, trails need maintenance, and facilities are neglected.

Some say that Congress must open its purse strings a little wider to address these budget holes. Others say that the new revenue must come from the NPS itself. Both groups are correct. Additional congressional funding is necessary to address the parks' basic maintenance needs, but the NPS must also creatively find new and innovative sources of funding.

The Interior Department has begun this process by proposing legislation (the Centennial Act) which would establish a matching fund for private donations and provide for modest increases in some fees. Not all revenue ideas will be popular, but all should be on the table, including ensuring that all fees are set at appropriate levels.

Such a review should consider asking international tourists to contribute more to our parks, which are taxpayer-financed. A family of four that spends thousands of dollars on a vacation to America pays only \$30 dollars (**\$15 per adult**) to visit the Grand Canyon. They'd pay more to go to a movie theater.

The NPS also has a pending proposal to allow for limited [recognition of donors](#) within parks and other minor changes with respect to private donations. That is a step in the right direction, but it misses the central problem. Currently, it is very difficult for public-private partnerships to raise money, because bureaucratic rules prevent them from managing projects more efficiently than the government can. I have seen too many prospective donors put their checkbooks away when they learn how much money will be wasted adhering to inflexible rules that guarantee duplication and delay.

That leads us to the second major challenge facing the parks: streamlining the bureaucracy to allow public and private dollars to be spent more efficiently and effectively. For instance, unless a capital project is funded exclusively with private donations, parks may not use outside designers and architects -- even those that offer their services free of charge. Instead, parks must go through the agency's central planning office, costing unnecessary time and money.

Park superintendents must be given more authority to form public-private partnerships that have the freedom to operate outside of the usual bureaucratic channels. A bipartisan bill that has languished in Congress, the Park Partner Enhancement Act, would begin to address some of these issues, but broader legislative changes are necessary, including expressly authorizing parks to combine federal and philanthropic funds in public-private partnerships.

In addition, parks superintendents should have more flexibility in allocating resources, so they can stretch their dollars further. And the NPS should make it easier to hire temporary and part-time workers who are teachers, veterans, and young people. Each group can play an important role in securing the future of parks, and the parks can open new doors for them, too.

Addressing these two main challenges -- raising revenue and improving efficiency -- is fully consistent with the National Park Service's history and mission. The man who led the campaign 100 years ago to create the NPS and who served as its first director,

Stephen Mather, made efficient management a top priority. He also introduced concessions to raise needed funds and worked closely with the railroad and automobile industries to promote access to the parks. In taking the job, Mather [reportedly said](#), “I will put the national parks on a business basis. They need it.” They still do.

Today, the National Park Service must rediscover Mather’s entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to innovative management, in order to put the parks on a path to success for the next 100 years.

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