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Economy & Efficiency Commission Presentation

Editorial Note: Although every effort has been made to insure the accuracy of the material in this presentation, the scope of the material covered and the discussions undertaken lends itself to the possibility of minor transcription misinterpretations.

**PRESENTATION BY
Mr. Rodney Cooper
Director, Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation.
Topic: Financing of Parks and Recreation Activities.
April 8, 1999**

Chairman Abel introduced Rodney Cooper, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). *Mr. Cooper* related that at one time, DPR had 2,200 full-time equivalent employees. DPR reached the level of 800 employees very recently, primarily due to a long string of cutbacks. Given that the DPR is a general-fund agency for the most part, and general fund dollars have been dwindling, it has become very difficult to keep the parks open and properly maintained. Partially as a result of cutbacks, DPR has given some facilities to other jurisdictions to save money--about \$1 million in operating costs. DPR has also accumulated a number of deferred-maintenance projects which were pushed back because operating budgets were so tight.

Mr. Cooper explained that Propositions A 92 and A 96 (now combined) provided DPR with money to refurbish and update accumulated projects. There was approximately \$540 million in 1992 and \$319 million in 1996 set aside for DPR projects. The passage of these propositions gave DPR responsibility for the administration of these and other projects. Tax monies have to be distributed to the 88 cities in the County consistent with the provisions contained within the propositions.

A "Proposition A Division" was set up to implement the bond issue plan. Competitive grants are reviewed and distributed by application and then reviewed by a panel of about 10 people. These 10-person panels don't actually meet each person evaluates the grant applications individually. From this evaluation a grading system (rank ordering) determines who receives the grants. Panelists are selected from universities, experts, et cetera, and are not compensated for their efforts.

During the period when these bond issues were being formulated, the DPR found it difficult to pay for services. DPR structured itself to refurbish existing facilities. The problem is that one does not "see" a \$1 million dollar irrigation system. Refurbishment is not "visible" in the way that a newly-constructed gymnasium would be. *Mr. Cooper* also mentioned that local facilities (parks) in the unincorporated areas are the domain of the DPR. Proposition A will allocate about 40 percent of what it will take to refurbish the existing facilities.

Over the past couple of years, the Board of Supervisors has discussed infrastructure as a pressing priority, and has allocated general-fund money to address the concerns. This year DPR has requested a \$56 million

allocation for infrastructure improvements. *Mr. Cooper* explained that he does not expect to receive the entire requested amount, but he does hope that some of the DPR higher-priority items will receive money from the general fund. The DPR is moving in the right direction and the budget and staffing has improved, including the restoration of some recreational programs for children.

Chairman Abel inquired about a proposal circulating in Sacramento for a large State park fund and wondered as to DPR's hopes and expectations from that piece of legislation. *Mr. Cooper* responded that there has not been a State bond issue for Parks and Recreation for about 10 years, and that the DPR thinks it is time to revive a new bond issue.

Commissioner Philibosian asked about why Beaches and Harbors funds are not committed and paid out, and whether Santa Monica Conservancy lands and County unincorporated territories overlap to some extent? *Mr. Cooper* responded that Beaches and Harbors have been trying to put together some funding with the Army Corps of Engineers to expand the funds available to do a number of very large projects. Regarding the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, these funds are primarily used for acquisition. DPR does not overlap with the Conservancy, which is a State agency, although there may be some cooperative trails which run through those mountains.

Commissioner Buerk asked *Mr. Cooper* to explain the split between the two types of budgeting in terms of local parks in unincorporated areas and regional parks. *Mr. Cooper* explained that the total operating budget is approximately \$70 million dollars (not including capital projects) and is about 55 percent self-sustaining. Regional parks impose a \$3 to \$6 fee and the 18-19 golf courses generate an annual profit of about \$14 million through golfing, parking, and league fees. The regional parks are close to being self-sustaining (85-90 percent). DPR emphasizes revenue generation and has raised the self-sustainment level from 35 percent to 55 percent over the past 7 years. Raging Waters is an example of a revenue-generating park (\$1 million per year). DPR tries hard to get the regional side to assist in paying for the local side. It is important to remember that regional parks are not completely self-sustaining.

Chairman Abel interjected that he serves on the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) School Bond Oversight Committee. He mentioned that one of the issues of that committee is how to leverage opportunities for new school development with library bonds and parks and recreation bonds in order to get the maximum leverage with infrastructure development. He asked how the County could do a better job of leveraging the many bond issues that are now being passed to create neighborhood assets throughout the region. *Mr. Cooper* responded that in the area of public works, which provides DPR (the County) \$4 million in operating funds per year, many of the County parks are located in flood control zones. This helps make regional parks self-sustaining.

DPR tries to work with other agencies whenever beneficial. As far as bond issues are concerned, one of the complexities for parks is that there are severe limits on what can be done with park land the use must be "recreation-oriented." *Chairman Abel* asked if there are opportunities (i.e. the zoo magnet school, primary centers now being put on city park land, et cetera) that can be explored in a cooperative environment. *Mr. Cooper* responded that there are a number of cooperative agreements with schools (Head Start programs) and they are exploring anything that can be done to make a multi-use type of facility.

Commissioner Stoke inquired as to how the County deals with botanical gardens. *Mr. Cooper* responded that DPR has 4 botanical garden facilities around the County. He added that all of the County golf courses are now privately operated. Part of the greens fees are set aside to be contributed to the capital needs for each particular course. The County is short about 35 golf courses. Out of 350 metro areas, Los Angeles was near the bottom in terms of the number of public golf courses serving the general population (per capita). DPR takes about 20 percent of the gross of golf course dollars. Development of a golf course is roughly \$12 million.

Commissioner Buerk asked how the number of local parks decreased as more and more cities have incorporated over the past several years. *Mr. Cooper* responded that there are still 60 parks operated by DPR and that attendance is up. One of the reasons is the high interest in soccer play. All of the park facilities were originally built for baseball (1950s through 1970s). The baseball interest is still strong, but now soccer

interest is just as strong. *Mr. Cooper* added that DPR does not provide contract services to incorporated cities. However, grounds maintenance at County parks is contracted out.

Chairman Abel thanked Mr. Cooper for his presentation.

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