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Comments: Rural Sweetwater Community and No State Park

The Sweetwater Community was caught off guard when the governor announced that the Sweetwater Lake property would become the newest Colorado State Park. This is not the usual way for a state park to be formed nor introduced.

The twelve miles of Sweetwater Road, located in both Eagle and Garfield Counties, has historically been an actual community. The previous generations incorporated a non-profit to manage a community center and to "engage in activities designed exclusively to promote the common good, civic betterment, social improvement, and general welfare of the people of the community." This non-profit continues today with both social gatherings of the 80+ families in the area and strong civic engagement including the addition of a Fire House equipped with a Wildland Fire Truck, and awarding a yearly college scholarship. Furthermore, the restaurant at Sweetwater Lake has been the heart of our community. It has been open under various ownerships for over 100 years, and reflects our rustic western culture. It is the spot for locals to meet each other, to introduce newcomers to the area, and to get caught up on community happenings. This state park idea would erase a large piece of our culture and history.

Why Change the Rules for this Park?

The usual way that a state park is established is through a formal proposal. At that time CPW looks to see if the proposed park meets their Five Established Criteria. From their website (in italics):

Future State Parks Criteria CPW's vision is that Colorado's state parks connect people to natural wonders. Every state park should offer a unique place to experience Colorado and live life outside. To accomplish this vision, future Colorado state parks will support a system of state parks that:

I. Provides outstanding nature-based recreation. Everyone regardless of age, abilities or interest, is connected to Colorado's diverse landscapes. Exceptional nature-based recreation provides for visitor education and enjoyment.

Sweetwater Lake meets this criteria.

II. Conserves natural resources. Large natural areas conserve resources and sensitive habitats. They also allow for sustainable outdoor recreation. Connections to conserved public and private lands advance landscape-scale conservation.

The property at Sweetwater Lake is already conserved as it is part of the US Forest Service.

III. Meets Colorado's needs. Attention is given to locations that will benefit from new outdoor recreation opportunities and resource conservation. Factors include distance to population centers, visitation demand, and ease of access. Future state parks are innovative, offer a range of amenities and experiences, and provide for evolving outdoor recreation interests. Colorado's state parks system can adapt to changes in society, the environment and technology.

This is not an area of new outdoor recreation, nor of new resource conservation. Recreation and conservation have been happening here for 100 years or more.

The distance to small town population centers is 24 or more miles. No close urban areas.

Visitation demand has been moderate the last 30 years and this moderate level is best for resource conservation.

Ease of access is debatable. There is a county road to the proposed park, but it cannot carry the load of visitors that a state park would introduce. Putting a state park in, with the load of traffic that would introduce, would make access difficult.

The park proposed in this area is not innovative. It is very similar to 42 other state parks.

This park would offer some amenities that were not offered previously such as RV hook-ups, dry cabins, etc, while removing other experiences such as historic rental cabins and an iconic restaurant. It is questionable whether this would be evolving outdoor recreation interests or devolving into a more mundane experience.

IV. Provides community value. Future state parks engage nearby communities. Local economies and quality of life improve by having a state park. The benefits of Colorado's state park system are available to everyone with attention to being inclusive and accessible.

This is the most debatable criteria. This future park did not engage the community before the announcement. A "token" engagement happened with a community representative group, but only after the fact. However the representative group stated at their final meeting that they didn't feel they had been listened to.

Local economies will suffer due to this state park. No one benefits economically. In fact, a small business at that location is being put out of business with this plan.

The quality of life will diminish dramatically with this plan. In June of 2023, at the annual Sweetwater Community Club meeting, a vote was taken whether to support the park idea, reject the park idea, or outwardly fight the park idea. Everyone was surprised that the third option - to fight the park - was unanimously voted in! That is how strongly the community feels their quality of life will be negatively affected.

The area has always been inclusive. Some of the access has diminished since USFS acquired the land. No access to the inlet area, no access to the large rock overlooking the east side of the lake, no access to the Indian Caves, no access to the restaurant, and no access to the historic rental cabins. All of the area could benefit from more disabled persons' access.

V. Supports a financially sustainable system. Looking into the future and park system-wide, new state parks are financially practical, considering acquisition, development, operations and management.

In order to make this park financially sustainable, developments would need to be constructed to bring in funds. As a park employee mentioned, the money is in electrical and RV's. However, the level of development needed for sustainability would be too much building for the unique flora and fauna of the area. The very entity tasked with conserving the delicate habitat would need to destroy part of it in order to bring in funds through hookups, RV pads, more established campgrounds, etc. There is possible income in park day use fees, but with the new license plates this might be minor.

Moreover, necessary new road construction would be financially impractical. Additionally, marketing would increase in order to get the additional visitor numbers needed for financial sustainability. But then the increased visitor numbers would hurt the park environment, hurt the flora and fauna, cause safety concerns, and destroy many of the positive things about the community.

It makes more sense to have no park, and let the concessionaire fees support the slight oversight that USFS would still need to do.

Furthermore, before a state park is established, several other steps are usually taken. Also taken from the state's website is the following:

11. Request of notification to the following parties:

a. CPW Regional Manager for the region where the property is located. Listed here:
cpw.state.co.us/aboutus/Pages/Leadership.aspx

b. Local government officials, including the Boards of County Commissioners and City/Town Councils geographically associated with the property.

c. State Representative(s) and Senator(s) whose district the property is in.

d. Federal or State land managers if associated or adjacent to the property or access to the property is through public land(s), such as the Bureau of Land Management, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Reclamation and State Land Board.

Parts a and d were followed, but no attention was given to parts b and c prior to the announcement of the state park. This has increased distrust between the local governments, boards, town councils, etc. that will be impacted by the park.

In addition, the following should be added to the application:

12. Description of any potential opposition to the project.

Since no one knew of the project before it was announced, the CPW Board was not aware of the dramatically high level of opposition that this project would meet.

Another part of the process asks for:

Requested Documentation:

1. Easements used to access the site

2. Survey of the site, if available

3. High resolution photographs of the site

4. Two to three letters of support

We are highly curious as to who contributed two or three letters of support. As far as we can determine, the only entities supporting this project are the USFS and the Eagle Valley Land Trust.

Negative Impacts

The Sweetwater Community is highly concerned with how a state park will affect the human culture here and how it will affect the wildlife found here. The developing and marketing of a park will detract from the enjoyment of our unique environment, damage the habitat, and destroy the historic character of the area. Our concerns are not limited to the potential impacts to our roads, homes, and quality of life, but to the many species of wildlife which have co-existed with the previous modest level of human activity. We fear impact to the calving elk with campgrounds in the pastures, loss of soaring peregrines and vulnerable pinyon jays, and diminished fragile plant life such as Harrington's penstemon and mountain willow. We foresee damage to migration patterns, loss of habitat, and increased stress on wild animals. We are troubled by the shock to the sensitive riparian area with increased use.

Other parks receiving more visitors than they can handle have the following observable impacts: more human/wildlife interactions, clogged roads, overused trails, increases in numbers of searches and rescues, fistfights over parking, excess human waste, use of drones, late night parties and more. Parks that are "over loved" show a lower quality of the outdoor experience. We fear labeling Sweetwater as a State Park, building up the amenities and infrastructure, and then marketing, will bring these problems to Sweetwater Lake.

Culture of Sweetwater Community

People have moved to the Sweetwater valley for the peaceful, country atmosphere, friendly neighbors, and unique scenery. We are anxious that our quality of life will significantly deteriorate due to a nearby state park. The marketing and promotional onslaught will place a recreational consumer target at the top end of our road! The park will bring noise, excessive traffic, and increased trash up and down the road. The area has no cell service, and we worry about safety issues such as accidents and potential trespassers to our quiet community. A park will box in large numbers of visitors on a one-way-out road, dangerous in case of wildfires. It will affect not only Sweetwater Road, but will have negative impacts on the Colorado River Road too. The cattle grazing along the open range of the River Road in the spring could be deadly with the increased traffic. The kids riding their bikes or walking their 4H animals on Sweetwater Road would be endangered. Those living next door to the lake will have to pay for day use and need reservations significantly in advance where before there was spontaneous use of the lake area. And we are especially worried that our beloved restaurant and cultural heritage center will

not reopen and might even be torn down.

We are close enough to Sylvan Lake State Park to have intimate knowledge of what happens when a local gem gets state park designation. Before Sylvan was named and managed as such, many locals such as ourselves and our friends, went there for a last minute weekend of free camping close to home. In addition, area equestrians could ride from there up into the forest. It was truly a beautiful, peaceful lake that lived up to its name. Now with the fee system, the increased traffic, the online reservation program, the loss of equestrian accessibility, and the heavy use, the locals avoid that lake. When asked, they have stated that becoming a state park has "ruined" the experience for them. In their case increasing access for the front range folks has meant losing access for the nearby residents.

Conclusions

As the mayor of the nearby town of Gypsum, Steve Carver, recently wrote in a letter "Our community loves this land and believes there's tremendous value in preserving not only the land but also the essence of the property[hellip]the value that citizens assign to it is a combination that's one-part stunning natural beauty and one-part prideful affection towards the storied cultural heritage of Colorado's rugged Western roots,,, the human elements that provide a bridge to connect us to the past,. Sweetwater Lake is a magical mixture that drives meaningful emotional connections,,,"

The people who live in the surrounding neighborhoods and towns are not in favor of having Sweetwater named as a state park. We are disillusioned by the process to reach that choice that did not follow the Colorado Park Service's own guidelines. We are distressed by the adverse effects a park could have on the natural environment and the nearby homes.

We are concerned that if this area is made into a moderate sized state park, what would keep it from expanding in the future? Instead, we want a small, undeveloped historic site that maintains the western cultural experience for our tourists and our locals. We can't emphasize enough how strongly the Sweetwater Community is opposed to both development and a state park at Sweetwater Lake.

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