

# Life *in the* Valley

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## Q&amp;A



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Oregon Parks and Recreation Director Lisa Sumption has watched the number of people visiting the state parks system skyrocket to a record-shattering 54 million visits in 2016.

## The czar of state parks

Director Lisa Sumption talks fees, drones and Leslie Knope

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Lisa Sumption has an odd problem. As director of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, she's watched the number of people visiting the state parks system grow and then skyrocket to a record-shattering 54 million visits in 2016.

That should be a good thing, especially since her stated goal is to make parks accessible to people of every socioeconomic class. But the problems that have followed — overcrowding, facility damage and a lack of parking — risk diminishing an experience that's supposed to be about relaxation.

The situation has created multiple complex, interlacing questions.

Should parks build larger parking lots or let fewer people in? Should their budget go toward hiring more park rangers or purchasing land for more state parks?

I put those questions — and a lot more — to Sumption during an hour-long interview earlier this month. Along with communications director Chris Havel, the two touched on those fundamental issues, along with drone use, stunge jumping and price increases at state parks.

Before the interview, I asked readers to suggest questions, which led to queries about the possibility of an Elliott State Forest State Park, her spirit animal and whether Sumption ever channels Leslie Knope (a character from the iconic show "Parks and Recreation") in her duties as parks czar.

Questions have been edited for length and clarity.

**You've been leading the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department for three years now. What challenges have you faced that weren't anticipated? What's surprised you about the job?**

**Lisa Sumption:** Just the breadth of the portfolio. People think we're just about state parks, but there's a lot more to it. We also have conservation and heritage programs, state scenic waterway programs, a scenic bikeway program, an all-terrain vehicle program and a community grant program. You'd be amazed how many things are part of our mission.

**Let's start with the budget. Two years ago, you cut back on purchasing new land to focus on improving the parks already part of the system. For the next two years, you've said you want to hire 42 new park rangers and put \$1 million into improving parks. What in the budget allows you to do that?**

**Sumption:** Two years ago, we pressed



Oregon Parks and Recreation Director Lisa Sumption

pause on (creating new parks) to make sure we were taking care of the entire parks system. For this budget, we want to make adding staff our top priority. We're up 20 percent overall and 45 percent in the off-season in visitation. Our folks are putting in a lot of time. They love their jobs but often can't get ahead on maintenance projects. The time to respond is now, before visitors are so disappointed that they stop coming.

**Let's go into "flexible fees." The premise is charging slightly higher rates at popular parks to fund lower rates and attract new visitors at less visited ones, correct? Why is it necessary?**

**Sumption:** Think about Fort Stevens State Park. It's at full capacity 85 percent of the time all year — and full capacity is 6,000 people. It's a small city. And it's full. At the same time, Humbug Mountain State Park, which offers a similar experience, is 20 percent of capacity. It doesn't get many visitors. One of our goals with flexible fees is to try charging maybe \$1 extra at Fort Stevens to pay for deep discounts to a place like Humbug.

Maybe somebody who's having problems getting a night at Fort Stevens would consider Humbug if they got a night of camping for free. We're trying to move some of our crowds across the system, and this is one way of doing that. We have a lot of parks with capacity that few people visit. We're testing this to see if we can encourage people to explore new areas.

**But once you're allowed to raise fees, what's to stop you from charging \$100 per night at Fort Stevens? The de-**

**mand is obviously there.**

**Sumption:** This would be a revenue-neutral program. We're not looking to make extra money with this.

**Chris Havel:** There's that temptation to charge what you can, instead of what you should. One way to get around that is to make sure we're not making any money of this, which is in the legislation. For every dollar extra we charge, we have to offset it.

**That brings up what's been kind of the biggest issue for you during the past few years — the rise in crowds. You just set a record for visitation with 54 million day-use and camping visits. Places like Smith Rock and parks on the Northern Oregon Coast are totally overrun on a pretty regular basis. How do you deal with that issue since it's not going anywhere?**

**Sumption:** The last thing we want to do is limit the number of people that go to a park or deny access. That's really not something we want to do. That said, there may be times when we'll have to consider it because you'd hate to have the parks system getting loved to death.

**Drones are becoming increasingly popular for photographers and videographers. How are you dealing with that issue at state parks?**

**Havel:** We've started a policy group to address the issue. That's actually going on now.

Right now, there are no rules related to drones in the state park system. It has been a case-by-case basis. If a drone could hurt people, the resource or park property, park managers have asked drone operators to stop. At Smith Rock,

for example, no drones are allowed because of nesting eagles. Next step will be crafting rules, park to park, for drones.

We want to make sure that somebody else's visit isn't going to be unduly affected by drones. You can imagine a cloud of drones hanging over South Falls at Silver Falls State Park. ... That's stuff we'll work through.

The way we'll go about these rules will probably look a lot like our policy for using metal detectors. Our approach is that at some parks you can do it any time without talking to park staff first. There are other parks where, before you start, you need to talk to park staff — you need permission. And last, there are some parks where it's not allowed at all. That three-tiered approach has worked well. It's predictable, all published online and people can find the information before going out. That's where we're going. That's the format.

**What are you excited about in the coming two years?**

**Sumption:** We're in a good place. We can be proactive. We're not talking about needing to close or privatize parks or ask for money from the legislature. We're trying to build and add new things that keep us relevant to the next generation. That's what I'm most excited about. I also want to get it to a place where every Oregonian, regardless of background, felt welcomed in a state park.

**Fun questions from readers ...**

**What's your favorite state park?**

**Sumption:** I love them all equally. Just like my children.

**To what extent do you channel Leslie Knope (of the television show "Parks and Recreation") in your duties as parks and recreation director?**

**Sumption:** I've never watched "Parks and Recreation." No really! I'm not a TV person! I saw a clip of it once because a family member said I had to see it. And honestly, it hit a little too close to home. I've seen about two minutes of it.

**Are you kidding?! Oregon's director of parks and recreation doesn't watch "Parks and Recreation?"**

**Sumption:** (Laughs). I don't watch any TV. I watch football. That's about it. TV would consume the time I get to spend outdoors.

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