

MINUTES
Washoe County Open Space and Regional Parks Commission
March 25, 2026

The Washoe County Open Space and Regional Parks Commission met in a scheduled session on Wednesday, March 25, 2026, in the Washoe County Commission Chambers, 1001 East Ninth Street, Reno, Nevada. The meeting was televised live and replayed on Washoe Channel at: <https://www.washoecounty.us/mgrsoff/Communications/wctv-live.php> also on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/WashoeCountyTV>.

Chair Jones called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. He congratulated Commissioner Kinsler on his reappointment to the Commission.

1. Roll Call

Members Present: Kevin Joell, Neal Jones, Chris Baker, Tracy Kuczenski, Jennifer Uvira (Zoom), Nicole Flangas, Miles Kinsler, BCC Liaison Mariluz Garcia.

Members Absent: Timothy Dake (excused); Sean Hill (excused)

Staff Present: Brandon Roman, Aaron Smith, Chaz Lehman, Eric Crump

2. Pledge of Allegiance

The pledge was recited by Commissioner Flangas.

3. Public Comment

There was no response to the call for public comment.

4. Approval of the Draft Minutes for the Open Space and Regional Parks Commission Meeting of January 28, 2026.

There was no response to the call for public comment.

Motion by Commissioner Kinsler to approve the January 28, 2026, Open Space and Regional Parks Commission minutes as written, seconded by Commissioner Kuczenski.

The motion passed with a vote of seven for, zero against, with Commissioners Dake and Hill absent.

5. Presentation, discussion, recommendation to approve and authorize Park Operations Superintendent to execute a three-year Special Event Agreement (2026-2028), with two (2) one-year extension options, between Washoe County and Great Reno Balloon Race, Inc. for the event to be held at Rancho San Rafael Regional Park, with compensation to the County in the amount of a \$9,920 fee and annual in-kind Park improvements of \$10,000.

Operations Division Director Aaron Smith summarized the event and the purpose of the item. He introduced Shila Morris, President of the Great Reno Balloon Race (GRBR) Board of Directors, and Elliot Malin, GRBR Board Member, who conducted a slideshow presentation and reviewed slides with the following titles: About the Great Reno Balloon Race; From Humble Beginnings to a Beloved Tradition; Ranked Top 14 Hot Air Balloon Festivals; Community Impact; Tissue Paper Balloon Launch; Local Nonprofit Partnerships We Support & Elevate; Public Access & Inclusivity; Economic Impact; Four-Day Event Expansion; Competitive Excellence & State-Level Recognition; Operational Impact; Rancho San Rafael; Park Improvements Facilitated by GRBR; Five-Year Park Improvement Plan; and Alignment with Washoe County Special Event Park Criteria.

Ms. Morris stated that Great Reno Balloon Race, Inc., was partnering with the Khan Academy, who will give a lesson about thermodynamics and the physics of hot air balloons. Mr. Malin spoke about the mental health benefits of attending the balloon races. Ms. Morris indicated that the balloon race event is the busiest weekend of the year for her restaurant. The event is invite-only, and the organization only invites safe pilots. She mentioned that they will work with an arborist to remove two pussy willow trees but plant four others in another part of the park.

Commissioner Joell noted the County had previously waived fees and provided sponsorships for the event totaling more than \$200,000 over the past decade. He expressed frustration that the GRBR slandered County staff and the Parks Board after it approved the Parks Master Plan, and he felt they deserved an apology. Mr. Malin felt he was brought onto the Board to help maintain the organization's relationships with the County and the Commission. He apologized for the breakdown in communication and expressed interest in building a better partnership. Ms. Morris believed the executive director for the organization had not seen the same version of the Master Plan that was approved, leading the organization to try to gain the public's support. She agreed with the goal of working together in a way that showed successful conflict resolution. Commissioner Joell pointed out the materials for that meeting were published five days before it took place, but he appreciated the apology.

Responding to Commissioner questions, Ms. Morris said the paper tissue balloons are propelled by burners until they separate from the burners and become airborne. There are competitions for the balloon that goes the highest and the one that travels the farthest.

Regarding fees, Mr. Smith explained that the fee covers Parks' costs, which are relatively low, and the opportunity costs to make up for lost reservations from some park facilities. The \$10,000 that was discussed reflected a partnership for use of the park and improvements and reinvestment back into the park. The GRBR existed before the Parks Department had a special event policy, he noted, but for typical events, fees are calculated on a per-person basis for those events.

Mr. Smith noted the agreement with GRBR contains a provision laying out what the event promoter is responsible for, including elements such as a recycling program and temporary fencing along sensitive areas. The organizer is also required to provide 12 cleanup crew members to leave the park in better shape than before the event. There are restrictions on the use of the turf, and any damage would be recovered through insurance. Commissioner Flangas wondered whether GRBR has spoken with the Regional Transportation Commission to discuss potentially expanding times for transportation. Ms. Morris thought that would be a good idea.

Commissioner Baker asked about the five-year plan. Mr. Malin indicated the GRBR Board regularly meets with Parks staff, and issues about barbed wire and drainage have been discussed. They have also discussed the location of trees, because the GRBR wants the park to be safe for balloons. Mr. Smith added that the Parks Department has oversight of all the improvements in the park, and they have worked hard to remove a lot of the barbed wire in the park. Mr. Malin indicated he would look into the proposed improvements at the McCarran Boulevard entrance and get back to the Commission with that information.

Mr. Smith remarked that the Board of County Commissioners has authorized the Open Space and Regional Parks Commission to approve special events agreements and the fees involved. He confirmed that the two one-year extensions would be handled administratively and would not need Commission approval.

There was no response to the call for public comment.

Motion by Commissioner Joell to approve and authorize Park Operations Superintendent to execute a three-year Special Event Agreement (2026–2028), with two (2) one-year extension options, between Washoe County and Great Reno Balloon Race, Inc. for the event to be held at Rancho San Rafael Regional Park, with compensation to the County in the amount of a \$9,920 fee and annual in-kind Park improvements of \$10,000, seconded by Commissioner Kinsler.

The motion passed with a vote of seven for, zero against, with Commissioners Dake and Hill absent.

6. Park Program of the Month – Presentation on 2026 “Come In From the Cold” by Jason Albery, Recreation Coordinator.

Mr. Albery conducted a slideshow presentation and reviewed slides with the following titles or descriptions: Overview; photo; Attendance and Community Support; Reaching the Community; Appearing on Kolo 8!; and Tasty Treats. Donations from the events, he explained, are used to pay musicians and purchase supplies for the shows. Attendance for 2026 was up 18 percent from last year.

In response to Commissioner questions, Mr. Albery responded that in the past, musicians were paid 75 percent of all donations received. This year, musicians either received a minimum of \$250 or 75 percent of the donations, whichever was larger; they were paid \$2,985 this year, all from donations.

7. Parks Reports

Operations Division Director Aaron Smith pointed out that though the regional population has grown by 16 percent over the last decade, park attendance has increased by 82 percent during that time. Last year, 8.2 million visited the larger County parks, in line with prior trends. He said the Parks Department is preparing for a historically early spring by turning on irrigation systems and preparing and permitting sports fields earlier than in the past.

Mr. Smith reviewed the materials included in the agenda packet for this item, highlighting past and upcoming ranger walks and junior ranger days, upcoming cleanup days, statistics pertaining

to the arboretum, and planning highlights. He pointed out that Washoe County is the only local jurisdiction with a dedicated trails coordinator.

Responding to Commissioner questions, Mr. Smith provided an update on the Davis Creek rehabilitation project, noting that the electrical infrastructure is failing. The day use area, the pond, and the trailhead are currently open, though the campground is closed due to the damage. Staff is currently forming a plan with relevant stakeholders. He anticipated that public meetings about the Lazy 5 Regional Park Master Plan would be held in the spring and summer.

Mr. Smith clarified that other jurisdictions outside Washoe County have dedicated trails coordinators. Commissioner Joell suggested obtaining porta-potties to partially reopen the campground. Mr. Smith responded that staff is considering certain creative opportunities to open it, such as by allowing dry camping. He said park attendance numbers are available via an online dashboard. He reviewed how park attendance figures are calculated, adding that parks without parking lots would not be included in those figures. He offered to provide additional information about the recorded attendance at different parks.

Mr. Smith estimated the Parks Department has 50 full-time and 20 seasonal employees, many of the latter being in the aquatics division. Budgetary considerations impact when seasonal staff can be hired.

8. Update and possible discussion on PROS Consulting's work to develop a Service Plan for the possible creation of a Park District.

Community Services Director Eric Crump announced that a concurrent Parks Commission meeting will be held with the Cities of Reno and Sparks on April 30 at 6:00 p.m.. PROS Consulting will conduct a presentation at the meeting, and results of the 748 surveys collected will be discussed. Additionally, the consultant plans to provide the levels of service for each jurisdiction related to park amenities, and next steps will also be discussed. He added that just over 500 surveys were returned as part of community-wide survey that was conducted, and that survey is now closed. Results will be posted to the Parks landing webpage.

Responding to Commissioner questions, Mr. Crump said the 748 survey results were slightly more than originally targeted, and the survey meets the definition of a statistically valid survey representative of Washoe County's demographics. He talked about the challenge faced when some Parks staff left after the Water Department merged with the Truckee Meadows Water Authority, adding that all parks employees want good parks for the community regardless of how that service is delivered.

Commissioner Joell opined that should the parks departments merge, the new entity would still have fewer employees than the levels experienced pre-2008. He thought establishing this district would help with the implementation of new programs and ensuring better dedicated funding. Mr. Crump discussed the importance of dedicated funding.

9. Director's Report

Community Services Director Eric Crump noted the County has used the same methodology for determining park attendance for 20 years, which has been useful in identifying trends. He confirmed that car counters are located in each regional park but not on trailheads. He said seasonal employees include park maintenance workers, ranger aides, and lifeguards, and he discussed the challenges associated with filling seasonal roles.

Mr. Crump indicated the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) approved amendment 1 to DOWL Engineering's design of South Valleys Regional Park, which addressed additional permitting and design requirements associated with the next phase of expansion. At the February 17 BCC meeting, the Galena Creek schoolhouse restoration project was rejected because all of the bids came in substantially over the engineered estimates, though the project will be attempted again with a phased approach. At the March 17 BCC meeting, a separate agreement with DOWL Engineering was approved for design of an amphitheater at Rancho San Rafael, which he hoped would help with fundraising efforts. Commissioner Kinsler's reappointment to the Commission was also approved at that same meeting.

Responding to Commissioner queries, Mr. Crump estimated the cost for the full amphitheater project, including elements like parking, will be around \$3.5 million. He explained that the next phase of the South Valleys Regional Park project, for which a grant was received, will include a minimum of one restroom/concession building and two girls softball fields. The County will need to facilitate access to the park via South Virginia Street, which will also be part of the project.

10. Commissioner Request for future agenda items.

There were no requests.

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This item was reopened later in the meeting. Commissioner Kuczenski requested an item addressing how habitat clearing is addressed by staff during breeding season. Chair Jones clarified that the item could address fuels reduction more generally.

11. Public Comment

Via Zoom, Ms. Valerie Anderson, president of the Northwest Nevada Bird Alliance, said her organization offered free birdwatching trips each week in many of the County's parks, including monthly trips to Rancho San Rafael and an upcoming event at Bowers Mansion. She pointed out that the prime bird nesting season is between March and June, so fuel reduction programs should take place between August and December. She wondered whether the County takes that timing into consideration when considering logging at its parks.

Deputy District Attorney Chaz Lehman advised the Commission that there should be no discussion on this topic, though it could be agendaized for discussion at a future meeting.

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Agenda Item 10 was reopened. See that item for details.

12. Adjournment

Motion by Commissioner Kinsler to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Commissioner Baker.

The meeting adjourned at 03:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Derek Sonderfan

Neal Scott Jones, L.S.

Chair Neal Jones