

County supervisors vote to reopen Walker Road

April 24, 2020



At a special meeting Tuesday, the Del Norte County Supervisors repealed an earlier vote to close Walker Road, the entry to Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park.

The supervisors also directed staff to work with the Del Norte Office of Emergency (OES) to draft and send a letter to California State Parks seeking a resumption of vehicle access to local parks for Del Norte residents.

District 3 Supervisor Chris Howard, whose district includes Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, spearheaded the vote, arguing that closing parking lots near Damnation Creek, Hiouchi and other trailheads has increased, rather than decreased congestion in spite of protective measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“We’ve all gotten phone calls from concerned citizens that outdoor recreation, in particular, is being stifled for local residents. We’ve seen here in Del Norte County, transients coming from outside to the community

has sluffed off but our residents are left with limited access points to state parks and national parks, forest service lands, to recreate,” Howard said.

The supervisors previously agreed on April 1 to close Walker Road at the request of California State Parks. The county highway also provides access to trails and parking areas for Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park.

In the new resolution, the supervisors unanimously found “the road closure is no longer necessary.”

Supervising Ranger Brett Silver explained that California State Parks issued “soft closures” on all 280 units following Gov. Gavin Newsom’s March 19 shelter-in-place order, which discouraged non-essential travel. Silver said the purpose of the Walker Road closure was to prevent people from congregating at trailheads and other places.

Silver said Howard asked how the process would work to exempt state parks in Del Norte County from the soft closures. Silver thought the best route would be through the Del Norte Emergency Operations Center.

“Probably Kymmie Scott, and make a request to the state operations center, which is the California Office of Emergency Services,” Silver said.

However, Liz Cable, Del Norte County Counsel, worried about the procedure in making such a request, noting that while the opening of Walker Road was on the agenda, follow-up action or direction to write a letter should also be on the agenda.

“We can direct staff to do something. I just don’t know that we can adopt a letter or do a motion for a letter without that portion being on the agenda,” Cable said.

Howard remained adamant about drafting a letter to request an exemption to reopen state park trailheads in the county. However, County Administrative Officer Jay Sarina, and director of the local OES office, pointed out that making a request through the OES isn’t exactly the same thing as writing a letter.

“I’m still a little bit confused as to why we’re going through OES on an order that came down from the governor to state parks,” said Sarina. “We can certainly review that and see if that’s the best step.”

Sarina promised to do some research to determine the best way to approach California State Parks with the soft-opening request.

Board Chair Gerry Hemmingsen also addressed complaints he and other supervisors received about vehicles being barred from access points in local state parks. Not wanting to diminish State Parks’ efforts to limit COVID-19 exposure, Hemmingsen pointed out that Walker Road was not well known outside of the county.

“I think the idea was of not wanting to become a destination for other people to flee their area and come to ours because we’re virtually COVID free,” Hemmingsen said. “Walker Road is known mostly by locals.”

In other board action, it unanimously approved granting temporary paid disaster leave to non-essential employees and paid personal holidays to essential employees.

Sarina explained that the resolution was in case the county had to go to more limited staffing at the recommendation of the public health officer.

“It allows me to institute it when the need is there,” Sarina said.

Supervisors also unanimously approved a professional-services agreement with COWI North America Inc., for the Pebble Beach Drive storm damage project.