

Comments of Mayor Bob Forrest

To the Subcommittee on National Parks
July 9, 2005

Mr. Chairman:

I want to thank you for holding your first National Park Sub-Committee hearing in Carlsbad.

One year ago, we had your Resources Committee here and just last fall, you brought Chairman Hobson here for a tour of the WIPP facility. And, having you here today at the Parks Committee is greatly appreciated. There is nothing like having these hearings here in our community.

Today, we are here to express our concerns about two subjects: the homeland security around our National Parks and the decline in the Carlsbad Caverns National Park visitations. Mr. Chairman, we have seen a tremendous decline in Park visitation and are very concerned about the future of the Park. We are also very concerned about the amount of money the Park Service is having to use for Homeland Security and National Border Protection. We certainly support the Homeland Security, but feel very strongly that we should not have to use the Park's budget.

Mr. Chairman, our community is very concerned about the drop in the Park's attendance in last 20 years. As you can see from the charts in front of you, we have had over a 50% decrease. Today, we are here to suggest some of the ideas that we feel would help the Park attendance.

One of the main issues we feel is hurting the Park is the tenure of the last four or five Park Superintendents, ranging from 12 to 18 months each. Mr. Chairman, there is no way you can run a business or a national park with that kind of turnover. We feel very strongly that the Park Superintendents should be here three to four years. We would also like to see more volunteers recruited from Park Service help. One of our biggest resources here in our city is the tremendous number of retirees who are very talented.

We feel like the Park should be more pro business and encourage the visitors to take advantage of the facilities at the Caverns.

Back in the early '90s, our local Masonic Lodge used to hold one of its annual ceremonies underground at the Caverns. They paid all the expenses and no additional costs to the Park Service. About 10 years ago, this was discontinued and has sent a very negative message to the community. Over 800 people would attend this event. And it was a very valuable P.R. event.

One of our main concerns for the last 20 years has been going through the process of renewing the concessionaire's contract. This has kept the concessionaires from any further development until this contract has been awarded. One of our biggest issues is the construction of the new restaurant at the surface entrance to the Caverns. We are told that the new facility will downsize the seating from its present 220 to 30 to 40 visitors. This is certainly a direction that is not positive if we want to try to increase travel at the Caverns.

We are working very hard to get US Highway 62-180 changed to a four-lane highway from Carlsbad to the State Line. It will be a big asset in helping increase visitation.

If nothing more comes out of these hearings, Mr. Chairman, I hope that one thing we accomplish today is to appoint in the future a Park/Community Advisory Board which would meet at least four times per year and help bring the community and the Park Service together. I feel like it is very important that we accomplish this.

Mr. Chairman, the good news is I am very encouraged that we are communicating to try to solve the attendance problem. I think we have a great window of opportunity with your commitment and our present Park Superintendent, John Benjamin, who wants to retire and end his career here in Carlsbad in the next four to six years. Mr. Benjamin has stated publicly on numerous occasions that he is committed to increasing Park attendance. This is something no other Park Superintendent in the past years has ever mentioned publicly. I strongly believe that the Park Service employees, the community, John Benjamin and yourself can certainly make a difference.

The Caverns is a world class facility and we as a community have to do everything we can to bring visitation back up.

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, I want to thank you again for holding these hearings. I think this is a big step in the right direction to help bring all of us together.

