

MINUTES
JOINT FINANCE-APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

DATE: Wednesday, February 18, 2026
TIME: 8:00 A.M.
PLACE: Room C310
MEMBERS PRESENT: Senators Co-Chairman Grow, Woodward, Cook, Bjerke, Hart, Carlson, Zuiderveld, Galloway, Ward-Engelking, Wintrow
Representatives Co-Chairman Tanner (14), Miller, Furniss, Petzke, Manwaring, Mitchell, Price, Bruce, Harris, Green
ABSENT/ EXCUSED: Representative Manwaring, Representative Green
CONVENED: **Co-Chairman Grow** called the meeting of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (Committee) to order at **8:00 a.m.** with a quorum present.

LSO STAFF PRESENTATION: **Department of Parks & Recreation, LBB 4-045 – Janet Jessup, Principal Analyst, Legislative Services Office (LSO)**

Ms. Jessup presented the budget for the Department of Parks & Recreation (see, attachment 1). She stated the Department of Parks and Recreation was created in 1965 but had existed in some form before becoming a separate state department. The agency recently underwent organizational changes, including consolidating the Administrative and Management Program with the Park Operations Program. She noted the department had 195 full-time positions (FTP), with a few vacancies when the budget was submitted that most vacancies had been filled.

She provided a Consolidated Fund Analysis for FY 23– FY 27 and described the department’s dedicated funds, highlighting the Parks and Recreation Fund and the Parks & Recreation- Recreational Vehicles Fund as the largest sources of revenue tied to park usage and registrations. She explained that previous years showed higher appropriations due to federal ARPA funds and General Fund transfers used for park infrastructure projects, which caused a drop in funding shown for FY 26 once those onetime funds were spent.

She stated most budget enhancement requests from the department were typically onetime funds for park improvements such as utility upgrades and RV campsite improvements, though some ongoing requests involved additional personnel and pay increases. She also explained a supplemental request related to the consolidation of programs, which would transfer about \$9.8 million in grant funds from a discontinued program into the current Park Operations Program to ensure accurate accounting and distribution to grant recipients. She said the department’s FY 27 budget requests included additional park and trail maintenance staff and several onetime projects funded mainly through dedicated and federal funds, with no new General Fund enhancement requests

DISCUSSION:

Susan Buxton, Director stood to address the Committee. She stated that during her five years as Director, the economic impact of outdoor recreation in Idaho had grown from over \$4 billion to more than \$5.5 billion. She noted that parks and recreation programs contributed about \$1.5 billion of that total, making outdoor recreation the state's third-largest economic driver behind agriculture and technology. She also presented pictures of park improvement projects throughout the state.

In response to Committee questions, **Ms. Buxton** provided additional information related to parks usage for Idahoans versus out-of-state visitors, FTP requests, the backstory and anticipated revenue for the newly acquired state park Twin Peaks in Lemhi County, fill rates at campgrounds, the OHV media campaign, and the astronomy center at Bruneau Dunes State Park.

**LSO STAFF
PRESENTATION:**

Office of the State Public Defender, LBB 5-101 – Janica Bisharat, Senior Analyst, LSO

Ms. Bisharat presented the budget for the Office of the State Public Defender (see, attachment 2). The Office of the State Public Defender is responsible for providing legal representation to indigent defendants at all stages of criminal and commitment proceedings under state and federal constitutions. She stated the office had an FTP cap of 333.96 positions and, because the agency was only about 18 months old, she presented year-to-date personnel data rather than five-year averages. She reported that there were 23.96 vacancies with a fill rate of about 93%, though six positions had already been accepted and scheduled to start, which would reduce vacancies to 17.96.

She stated that the agency's budget came from the General Fund and the Public Defense Fund, totaling about \$83.2 million for FY 2026. She explained that FY 2025 expenditures were lower than estimated because the office did not assume full responsibility for indigent public defense until October 1, 2024, leaving only nine months of operations that year, along with additional savings from unfilled positions.

She reviewed the Public Defense Fund, noting it received a statutory transfer of \$39 million each year along with reimbursement fees, and that the projected ending balance for FY 27 was just over \$19 million. She reviewed prior budget enhancements, including funding for a statewide case management system, legal representation under the Child Protective Act, court-ordered transcripts, and additional personnel and contracting costs to increase wages for attorneys and investigators.

For FY 26, several ongoing enhancements were approved, including funding for contract attorneys, investigators, experts, evaluations, capital litigation costs, technology, and training. Additional funding increased salaries for state attorneys and raised the contract attorney rate to \$125 per hour, along with ongoing funding for transcript costs following an Idaho Supreme Court decision.

She explained that for FY 27 the agency requested six additional trial attorney positions for several counties, along with funding for secure hosted data storage for multiple offices and a onetime request for laptops and data migration. She noted that these requests were included in the Governor's budget recommendation.

DISCUSSION:

Eric D. Fredericksen, State Public Defender stood to address the Committee. He stated the agency's mission was to provide holistic defense for individuals who could not afford legal counsel, maintaining the highest ethical and professional standards while protecting their constitutional rights. He said holistic representation meant client-centered advocacy that surrounded clients with resources to address underlying issues and help keep them out of the justice system in the future. He emphasized that helping clients early in the process was more cost-effective than dealing with them later in the correctional system.

He noted that the Office of the State Public Defender was still a relatively new agency, about one year and four months into operation, after consolidating public defense services from 44 counties into a single statewide system. When the agency began operations on October 1, 2024, he said they inherited more than 1,300 withdrawn cases, which forced district defenders to spend significant time in court catching up rather than performing their intended administrative and coordination roles. He stated operations had stabilized and district defenders were now able to work with judges and commissioners as originally intended.

He said that during the first year the agency had to estimate costs and operate with limited data because it had not yet completed a full fiscal year. He also referenced the pending case Tucker v. State of Idaho before the Idaho Supreme Court, noting a district court warning that if the new statewide system failed due to structural deficiencies, additional legal challenges could follow.

He reported that with support from the legislature and Governor, the agency had hired 55 new employees since July 1, 2025 and reduced its vacancy rate from nearly 20 percent to about 7 percent, with 93 percent of positions filled. He added that the office had developed recruitment pipelines with Northwest law schools to bring in new attorneys and expected all positions to be filled by October 2026. He also described efforts to partner with colleges to recruit social workers who could help connect clients with services early in the process, which he said would reduce the likelihood of clients entering the corrections system and increase long-term cost savings for the state.

In response to Committee questions, **Mr. Fredericksen** provided additional detail related to the impact of budget rescissions, case workload, attorneys available for capital cases, the costs associated with Child Protective Act cases, leases with counties, cost savings for counties, attorney pay, and attorney training costs.

ADJOURNED:

There being no further business before the Committee, **Co-Chairman Grow** adjourned the meeting at **9:16 a.m.**

Senator Grow
Chair

Keith Bybee
Secretary