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## Will Rogers Group Seeks Park Control

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[Danielle Gillespie](#), Staff Writer

Responding to the California State Parks' call for public and private partnerships to keep parks open, the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation has petitioned to operate Will Rogers State Historic Park in Pacific Palisades.

'We'd like to help out the state and take over more responsibilities,' said Jennifer Rogers-Etcheverry, Will Rogers' great-granddaughter and one of the founders of the foundation, which was incorporated in January 2008 to provide additional funding for the park.

In July, the state cut \$14.2 million from the State Parks' budget, which means that about 100 parks could be closed. The department is now looking to the private sector, cities and counties as well as the National Park Service for financial help.

'We feel we can come in and with proper management make it a profitable park,' Rogers-Etcheverry told the Palisadian-Post.

The Will Rogers Ranch Foundation is one of 84 cooperating associations within State Parks. The associations are nonprofit organizations that raise millions to pay for staff positions, exhibits, visitor centers, nature walk programs, special events and more, but they do not manage the state parks. Will Rogers Ranch Foundation has raised about \$100,000 since it was formed.

In response to the foundation's request, State Parks Director Ruth Coleman wrote a letter on August 28, saying 'I am thrilled you are interested in a joint proposal with State Parks ' the site serves as a tremendous resource for the public, and we are eager to explore a creative management solution with you.'

There are currently four nonprofit organizations that operate a state park or part of one, said Sheryl Watson, State Parks' spokeswoman. They include El Presidio de Santa Barbara, Marconi Conference Center, Mendocino Woodlands and Mount San Jacinto.

'By law, only public entities can operate state parks,' Watson said. However, special legislation was obtained for those four parks.

Todd Vradenburg, a Pasadena resident and Will Rogers Ranch Foundation board member, said the organization would like to enhance the 186-acre park and is devising a management plan. The park currently collects money from leasing the polo field and the horse stables as well as from the entertainment industry for filming.

'We are developing a more detailed plan as we speak,' Vradenburg said, who is also the executive director of the Will Rogers Motion Pictures Pioneers Foundation.

He noted that renting space for special events is one option being explored by the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation's board, which also consists of Rogers-Etcheverry, Trudi Sandmeier (whose grandfather was Will Rogers' personal assistant), Wyatt McCrea, (grandson of actor Joel McCrea), and Diane Keaton (an Academy Award-winning actress).

If the state allows the foundation to operate the park, Rogers-Etcheverry said her group would like to resume construction on the visitors' center, which will house a gift shop. Construction was halted when state legislators froze all bond-funded projects.

'We lost a season of revenue with the gift shop,' Rogers-Etcheverry said.

The foundation would also like to have the ranch house open six or seven days a week. Tours of the ranch house are currently offered Thursday through Sunday.

Another goal is to place more interpretive signs at historical landmarks around the park. Unless park-goers take a tour of the ranch house, they may not even know Rogers lived there, Vradenburg said. Betty Rogers deeded the property to the state in 1944 as a memorial to her husband, a legendary actor and humorist.

'We want to keep Will's legacy alive ' it's our duty to educate any person who visits the park, so they know what is so special about this place,' Vradenburg said.

There is also a long list of deferred maintenance. The barn's roof leaks, the fencing needs repairs, and a lath structure behind the ranch house is 'falling to pieces,' Rogers-Etcheverry said.

'The money has just not been there to pay for repair and restoration,' she added.

Rogers-Etcheverry believes that such improvements can easily be made. The foundation already has the support of the Will Rogers Memorial in Oklahoma, the Will Rogers Cooperative Association, the Pacific Palisades Historical Society, the Rogers Co., the Will Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation and the Will Rogers Polo Club.



[Rich Schmitt](#) / Staff Photographer

The Will Rogers Ranch Foundation, led by Will Rogers' great-granddaughter Jennifer Rogers-Etcheverry, would like to operate Will Rogers State Historic Park.

Discussions with the state regarding the proposal have just begun and no decisions have yet been made.

'We are here to work side by side with State Parks,' Vradenburg said.

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