

Keeping National Parks Open Amid Uncertainty

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Pending Federal Government Shutdowns, National Parks, and their Economies

As a federal shutdown looms, Utah leaders say they will keep the state's crown-jewel national parks—Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, and Zion—open to visitors. Local reporting details contingency funding and operational work-arounds meant to avoid the closed gates, shuttered facilities, and visitor confusion that marked past lapses (Tavss, 2025). At the same time, retired National Park Service (NPS) leaders are publicly urging Congress to reach a deal to prevent furloughs and service disruptions that reverberate through public-lands communities (Lind, 2025). The common thread in these stories is straightforward: reliable park access and gateway economic stability are inseparable. In 2024, NPS units nationally hosted 331.9 million recreation visits; visitors spent an estimated \$29.0 billion in nearby communities; and that spending supported 340,100 jobs and \$56.3 billion in national economic output (Flyr et al., 2025). Lodging accounted for \$11.1 billion in direct output, followed by \$5.7 billion in restaurants. These are not abstract figures for towns like Moab, Springdale, Torrey, Tropic, Kanab, and others; they are the payrolls, sales-tax receipts, and small-business margins that carry communities through the winter. The composition of spending also underscores why any operational disruption matters. Parties staying outside park boundaries account for roughly 75% of total visitor spending, averaging about \$435 per party per night—dollars that flow directly to local lodging, food, fuel, retail, outfitters, and guides. When access is uncertain, those overnight stays are the first to shrink or cancel, compressing local multipliers in real time. Shoulder-season dynamics amplify the risk. The NPS reports that off-season visitation—especially spring and fall—continues to rise across more than half of parks, making late-September and October a second peak for many Utah destinations. A lapse in this window jeopardizes precisely the months that help businesses recover from summer heat and build reserves for the off-season (Flyr et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2018).

From Stopgaps to Systems

Utah's readiness to underwrite essential functions during a lapse—keeping facilities open, contracting for basic services, and ensuring visitor information—demonstrates pragmatic state leadership while the federal budget remains unsettled. But state funds cannot fully substitute for stable federal operations. Even with contingency agreements, parks still depend on NPS rangers, resource managers, and specialized rescue teams—roles central to visitor experience and resource protection. Repeated shutdown threats also impose stop-and-start costs that crowd out trail work, water and wastewater system upkeep, and wildfire/flood recovery later in the year. And because not every state can or will backfill federal functions, a patchwork approach risks widening disparities among gateway communities. Spending in national park gateway communities depends on a chain of enabling conditions—access, staffing, sanitation, information, safety—most of which are degraded before a park is formally “closed.” In practice, that means uncertainty alone shortens trips, reduces overnight stays, and lowers local economic output even if gates remain technically open.

Partnering for Resilience

While leaders manage the near-term risk, long-term resilience can be bolstered by aligning state, federal, and non-profit/university capacities. In the face of a pending shutdown—and the broader volatility that gateway places increasingly face—state and federal officials can proactively partner with non-profit and universities to turn known problems into executable, locally tailored solutions. In the immediate term, state and federal land managers can co-design contingency operating plans with non-profit and/or universities assistance that (1) specify minimum viable services for sanitation, information, and safety; (2) map roles for local governments, DMOs, concessioners, and volunteers; and (3) pre-clear communications templates that reduce last-minute confusion about hours, conditions, and crowding. Non-profit and/or university partners can facilitate exercises with gateway communities so that, when uncertainty hits, messaging is unified and visitors do not overwhelm understaffed trailheads or fragile sites.

Over the next 6–18 months, state and federal partners can also engage universities to modernize gateway data systems that inform operations and business continuity. NPS visitation trends show rising off-season use and the dominance of outside-park lodging in total spending; pairing those insights with local occupancy, STR, sales-tax, and mobility data helps communities time events, staffing, and transit services to smooth

peaks and protect margins. Universities can help stand up lightweight dashboards and protocols that convert disparate data streams into decision-grade indicators for county administrators, public works, law enforcement, and search-and-rescue.

Over the next 2–3 years, agencies and universities can co-lead place-based planning so that essential assets are resilient to fiscal whiplash. Place-based training programs, such as the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism's Gateway and Natural Amenity Region Initiative, provide the curriculum and peer cohorts that give small towns the technical and planning assistance to write implementable plans, update land-use codes, coordinate shoulder-season programming, and align transit and parking across jurisdictions.

At the policy level, durable intergovernmental contingency plans benefit from neutral conveners. Universities can host structured, recurring state–federal–local roundtables that surface emerging threats that may become acute during future shutdowns. The aim is to reduce uncertainty by pre-authorizing contingency mechanisms that align with federal, state, and local priorities.

Utah's real-time choice to sustain park access while the shutdown looms speaks to the economics of access: **when parks function, communities function.** The data support that conclusion, and the partnership pathway is clear. Federal and state managers working with universities—and non-profit organizations that can serve a similar roles as neutral conveners—can turn contingency into capacity, and uncertainty into more resilient, year-round gateway economies.

References

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