

Testimony on Bill H.B. 5417: An Act Concerning Open Space and the Creation of Trails for All-Terrain Vehicles

My name is Leslie Lewis, and I am a resident of Lyme. Prior to my retirement in 2007, I was employed by the CT DEP. The last ten years of that service, I was the Trails and Greenways Coordinator for the department. In this capacity, I was the primary liaison between the DEP and the off-highway vehicle (OHV) community.

I am opposed to the language in the bill that requires the DEP to identify property for an OHV trail and to commence construction prior to July 1 of this year. In 2002 the DEP drafted a policy for OHV use on State land, which included registration and certification requirements. The registration fees that could have been collected and accumulated from 2002 to now could have funded and developed several OHV facilities. Those have never been put into statute. After the policy was in place, DEP reached out to the OHV interests and asked for help in finding appropriate locations for a motorized vehicle trail. As part of that effort, the department gave them a listing of all state properties over 50 acres that could be evaluated. They were also given, at no cost, all GIS data layers for DEP properties and tutorials on how to utilize that data. I was continually assured that a preliminary proposal would be delivered so that we could begin a screening process.

At the same time, I encouraged all motorized user groups to take advantage of the Recreational Trail Program (RTP) grants. While snowmobile and dirt bike clubs did apply for grants and complete some excellent projects, I never received an application from an ATV organization. These grants could have been used to purchase property as well as construct trails. I point this out because I hear many times that DEP won't "share" RTP funds with motorized users. I would have gladly supported any reasonable application that I received. It is important to remember that all RTP applicants are responsible for 20 percent of the project's costs.

OHV groups were members of the Recreation Subcommittee of the Forest Resource Plan working group, as were hikers, cyclists, equestrians, hunters, and fishermen. A brochure on trail and forest use was produced by the subcommittee, with a focus on safety and outdoor ethics. All co-sponsors of the brochure were asked to echo that message on their own websites and in their own literature. I never saw any such message on any site pertaining to ATVs. In fact, I was told that no such message would be broadcast if there was nowhere to ride legally. I honestly believe that this refusal to vigorously promote legal riding has resulted in the proliferation of illegal activity and the negative impression that the non-motorized public has of OHV users.

I still hadn't given up, however. In the winter of 2007, DEP sponsored a week-long workshop on OHV trail development with the National Off-Highway Vehicle Coordinating Council (NOHVCC), the nationally-recognized leader in OHV education and advocacy. All OHV user groups were invited at no charge to them. DEP provided facilities and refreshments and made sure that key staff members were on hand to be educated as well. NOHVCC echoed the message about the need for a positive image for OHV users including legal riding.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Environment Committee, I don't know how many times we need to rehash these issues. The DEP is not singling out the motorized community for unfair treatment. Any new trail or change of use on an existing trail on DEP land is subject to application and review by the department's trails committee, no matter whether the proposed users are hikers, cyclists, equestrians, or OHVs. Potential impacts are weighed and evaluated. Any such trail or change of use must be maintained by the sponsoring organization. Yet over the last eight years, no reasonable OHV proposal has been submitted. No organization that I am aware of has pro-actively raised money to match RTP grants or to purchase options on properties. No public education effort about safe and responsible riding as taken place. Sales of vehicles have continued, yet these same buyers complain that they cannot afford higher registration fees.

I know when I was at DEP, we didn't have the staffing or funding necessary to oversee the planning, design, and construction of OHV facilities. Now that most DEP accounts have been swept into the General Fund, where are the dollars to come from? From the increased fees that regular State Park users will pay? Only 30 percent of federal RTP funds can be used for such a purpose in any one fiscal year. Where would the match come from? How can the department possible plan such a facility, taking into account all necessary evaluation and protection of natural resources? When will you finally require financial and legal responsibility from the motorized community?

Thank you for your time.