

Testimony Re: Legislation before the Environment Committee on 3/15/2013

**Raised S.B. 1011 An Act Concerning Certain User Fees at State Parks
Raised S.B. 1015 An Act Concerning the N.E. National Scenic Trail**

Testimony of:

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Dear Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in Support with Change of two bills before you today, raised SB 1011 and raised SB 1015.

Raised S.B. 1011

The Friends of Connecticut State Parks certainly appreciate the committee's recognition that increased revenues are needed to support operations in our severely under funded park system. We agree wholeheartedly that fees should be raised, as receipts from rentals have not kept pace with the increasing costs of offering park venues for special use events. We do not feel, however, that a different fee structure for out of state patrons should be instituted for a variety of reasons.

Requiring field staff to administer an in state/out of state fee structure would burden an already overwhelmed group of workers with ambiguous regulatory directives which could readily be circumvented by the public. Parties and special events that take place in rented park buildings and pavilions are very often attended by persons from multiple states. Weddings, reunions, and conferences, for example, typically attract participants regionally. When applying for a license or signing a permit, any savvy group would have an in state guest as their signatory in order to secure the favorable in state rate. Wedding couples with an in state groom and an out of state bride would, without doubt, opt to have the groom sign paperwork, whether or not he paid for the reception. Trying to determine the veracity of applicants would only create unnecessary headaches for staff and embroil them in rancorous arguments with would be patrons.

As well as being impractical, the in state/out of state fee structure would drive away out of state groups at a time when Connecticut is trying to promote tourism and bolster local economies. The object of the game is to take business away from other states, not to give potential customers disincentives to choose Connecticut for their celebrations. Quite rightly, any prospective out of state renter would feel that charging a different price for exactly the same service was very unfair and would do their utmost to find alternate locations for gatherings.

The Friends of CT State Parks believe that an up to 150% increase across the board is much preferable to a divided fee structure. We would also very strongly recommend that the revenues raised under this bill continue to be directed to the DEEP Maintenance Repair and Improvement Account. The revenue in this account is wholly dedicated to maintaining and enhancing the parks that raise that revenue. If fee increases were to be diverted to the General Fund, the parks with the greatest levels of special events would not have funds sufficient to combat the inevitable deterioration that comes with heavy public usage. Husbanding and utilizing funds for regular repair and maintenance ensures not only that special events groups will be satisfied return customers, but that everyday visitors will consistently have positive and rewarding experiences in our parks. All benefit.

Raised S.B. 1015

The Friends strongly support this bill, but recommend the removal of the phrase “eminent domain” from line 6 of the bill. When this phrase was included in the scenic National Scenic Trail designation bill before Congress, it prompted a delay in passage. To forestall a repeat of this delay, and to remain true to the essence of the national scenic trail designation, we think it best to delete this phrase.

Respectfully submitted,

Eileen Grant