

**The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee – Testimony for 26 September 2013 Hearing
State Parks and Forests: Funding Study**

I am writing today to encourage the Legislature to focus and support the CT State Park system. The State Parks, created in 1913 are celebrating their Centennial. While the DEEP State Parks Division and the Friends of Connecticut State Parks are putting a “happy public face” on 100 years of State Parks, in reality, the parks have reached an all-time low in staffing, appearance and public profile. In fact, there is no funding from the state to hold a celebration of their parks. Private funding is being raised by volunteers to run programs which call attention to the centennial and bring children and families to the parks.

In 1978, shortly after the CT Dept. of Environmental Protection was created, the State Parks Division boasted a roster of 278 full-time field employees. There were 90 parks and 31 state forests and, fewer than 80 boat launches. These folks were highly skilled workers who maintained the buildings, grounds, mechanical systems, roads and trails throughout the parks and forests. When new employees were hired, they learned the ropes from experienced craftsmen and were able to carry on the good work of keeping the park and forest recreation areas, safe and well-maintained places of beauty. Today, with the greatest acreage and diversity of facilities, there are only 70 full-time employees to maintain more than 107 parks, 32 state forests, 119 boat launches and hundreds of miles of roads and trails. The workforce is aging and few, if any, vacant positions are being refilled. There are no new workers to learn about how to maintain the parks. Older park employees retire, taking their hands-on knowledge with them. Those older workers that remain are experienced a greater rate of injury due to the lack of stronger, younger staff to help with the work. There is no on-site presence of employees in many locations – leading to increased vandalism, theft and trash strewn about park grounds.

Connecticut’s State Parks generate more than 1.6 billion dollars in revenue and taxes. They play a tremendous role in the state’s Tourism Industry – drawing 8 million visitors through the gates each year. Sadly, the revenue that the parks generate from their annual visitation is not reinvested in the State Parks Personnel Services, Operating Expenses and Equipment budgets; rather, it goes to the general fund and redistributed for other state needs. The Legislature has recently been generous in investing in new infrastructure in the parks and, that is a good thing. The rest of the story is that if there is no one to maintain new cabins, roads and buildings, the investment will be for naught.

CT’s State Parks are fortunate to have volunteers who devote countless hours to supporting the parks. Friends organizations have funded the construction of entire buildings, paid for public education programs, maintained grounds and trails, purchased equipment to help with maintenance and serve as constant advocates for these special places. Agency leaders often lean on volunteers to fill voids left by the departure of full-time employees. This reliance has become all too commonplace. Friends, many of whom range in age from late 60’s to mid-80’s, should never be considered as an offset to critically needed, skilled employees.

Of all of the State Agencies, the State Parks Division provides the greatest return to the state for every tax dollar spent. As the State Parks continue their centennial celebration, review their history and contributions to our state and re-invest in a park system that has done the people of CT proud for 100 years. Please do not let this time be the last chapter in an exceptional State Parks story.

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