



Honorable Co-Chairs Kissel, Mushinsky, and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee.

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My name is Julie Hulten. I am a member of the Sleeping Giant Park Association and serve on the Board of Directors as Community Outreach Chair. In addition, I actively participate in a number of other SGPA committees, and hike regularly and often at Sleeping Giant. I speak here on behalf of the Association's Board of Directors and the over 1700 members who share a love of "our" Giant.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to provide testimony in favor of House Bills 5369 and 5370 concerning the funding of Connecticut State Parks

Like all Friends' groups, the Sleeping Giant Park Association is devoted to preserving, promoting, and maintaining its Park. While that's an oft-stated truth, allow me to detail exactly what that means. It means that each Sunday between April and December a Trails Crew of 15-20 volunteers goes out patrolling, devoting well over 800 hours annually to clearing and blazing trails, controlling erosion, eliminating graffiti, and picking up trash. Volunteers have created and maintain a Butterfly Garden which delights its many visitors and which has earned us the attention and appreciation of the Audubon Society. In the winter, spring, and fall of each year our Hiking Committee leads 17 guided and interpretive hikes for both recreational and educational purposes. The primary aim of the latter is to increase public awareness of the Park's cultural heritage and natural history. The Association offers muscle, support, and supplies to Boy Scouts completing their Eagle projects in the Park. These efforts may include construction of bridges, stairways, and retaining walls, and the installation of water bars. Our webpage gets myriad hits due to the efforts of our IT coordinator, and our Facebook page, which we use to relay pertinent information about the State Parks to our many constituents, has well over a thousand 'likes'. An extensive system of trail markers highlighting significant geological features was created and is maintained by our Hiking Chair, who also oversaw the writing of an online Geology Guide. At our expense, the SGPA provides Park visitors with Trail Maps and a Nature Guide free of charge. In addition to offering presentations to local groups and organizations about the history of the Giant, the Association publishes a highly acclaimed tri-annual newsletter. This printed newsletter informs members and others of Park activities, news relating to the Sleeping Giant Park and the Association, and reports on the natural history of the Giant. Volunteers from the Association periodically accompany and act as trail guides for school groups and lead work crews consisting of individuals seeking to fulfill public service requirements for high school graduation and for other organizations. To oversee the ecology and natural diversity of targeted areas of the Park, our Environmental Stewardship chair leads work crews to control the spread of invasive plant species and address other pressing ecological

issues that affect the Park. Moreover, we organize a regular Bioblitz to track and catalog the plants and animals found in the Park. Despite efforts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to turn the trap rock ridges into a resort, the lands were preserved when area residents banded together in 1924, formed the Sleeping Giant Park Association, established a Park, and turned all acquired land over to the State of Connecticut for future safekeeping. The SGPA continues to have, as its chief priority, the purchase of land on and around the geographical Giant – land that is then deeded to the State to expand the existing boundaries of the Park.

This litany is not given to impress you with how much work the SGPA does, nor are we alone in the myriad contributions the Friends' groups make. It is rather to call attention to how dedicated all of the State's Friend's groups are and how much effort they contribute towards maintaining their respective Parks. However, to paraphrase a testimony from the March 4<sup>th</sup> hearing, Friends' groups should be the dessert, not the main course. The burden of supporting and maintaining our State Parks should not fall upon the good-will of Friends' groups but rather must rest solidly on the shoulders of the State. Consistent attention and funding of State Parks is the only effective course of action that assures that those Parks are kept optimally safe and attractive to their many beneficiaries.

I know SGPA joins other Friends' groups in being deeply concerned about the ongoing trend in inadequate funding of Connecticut State Parks. At Sleeping Giant, I am gratified by the collaboration and support shown by the Park staff towards the efforts of the SGPA to maintain the trails; attract the public to the Park; and make visitors' time in the Park safe, informative and enjoyable. I believe that each member of the Park staff, whether regular full-time or seasonal, loves the Park as we do. They decry the sad fact that because their daily demands are so pressing and available staff so limited, they are unfamiliar with most of the Park trails.

This brings me to HB 5369 and HB 5370 and the troubling findings of this committee. Our State Parks are woefully underfunded and understaffed. In order to guarantee the well-being, safety, and enjoyment of its citizens, the Connecticut legislature must ensure that our State Parks are adequately supported. In addition, the sense of ownership by State Park staff that we volunteers see profusely in evidence should be fostered and, if you will, rewarded. Revenues generated by each State Park belong in its own operational fund - not at a 20% - 50% level that the current bill states MAY occur, but at a 100% level. Those revenues MUST be available to each Park for ongoing maintenance and improvements. Which of us would not be inspired to increased dedication and creativity if we knew that the fruits of our labor were ours to reinvest?

Our State Park System is a treasure. The individual Parks are areas rich in the history, lore, beauty, and natural diversity that make our State unique and they deepen our connection to and love of Connecticut. By creating a system of State Parks, Connecticut made a promise to its citizens: to keep and preserve those areas of natural beauty, human history, and vital biologic habitat that characterize our State. We trust you to keep that promise with both adequate funding and assurance that our State Parks remain safe and viable for the education and recreation of all Connecticut residents, wherever they may live in the State, now and in the future.