

Appropriations Committee

March 2, 2015

Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Budget Public Hearing

Dear Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Douglas Jann. I work for the State of Connecticut as an Environmental Analyst with the State Parks Division. However, I am submitting written testimony today as a member of CSEA SEIU Local 2001 and as a concerned resident of Connecticut.

After joining the department in 2008, I witnessed significant losses in personnel that have left the public underserved and DEEP staff considerably overburdened in their attempts to compensate. When I first came to State Parks, the division had a full-time administrative assistant and an office manager, as well as significant support from the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation's administrative assistant. These positions became vacant due to retirements in 2009 and 2010, and they have not been refilled. In addition to the clerical burden that has been shifted onto professional staff, thereby curtailing their ability to perform their usual duties, there is also a direct impact to the public each and every time someone attempts to contact the State Parks Division.

During the off-season, there are no administrative staff assigned to the State Parks Division. Incoming calls are fielded by administrative staff in other divisions, or not at all, and despite the best of agency intentions, callers are often misdirected too many times or they are provided with less than the best available information. When a caller finally reaches division staff who can assist them, they are often so aggravated by then that staff must work uphill to mitigate the impact of being bounced around from extension to extension.

During the peak season, the division hires a seasonal resource assistant to cover the front desk, but these workers typically start from scratch and must be trained from the ground up each year. As you might imagine, six months is scarcely enough time to become sufficiently familiar with state park operations to be qualified to usefully assist the public.

Aside from personnel reductions in the Hartford office, the field offices have also sustained substantial losses due to vacant positions going unfilled or being eliminated outright. As the Special Use Coordinator for the division, I work closely with every office in the park system, and I field approximately 1,000 phone calls annually from charitable organizations and other members of the public who are interested in hosting special events at the parks. In other words, I communicate with a lot of people on a regular basis, and I have seen no indication that any division field staff are dodging public inquiries. To the contrary, state park supervisors are possibly the civil servants most likely to return your call promptly.

Yet, with increasing frequency in recent years, I receive calls and messages from the public on my extension in Hartford reporting that they have been calling or emailing a field office for days or weeks but they are not getting a reply. In 2009, I received a handful of such complaints during the entire year. In 2014, I received a handful of such complaints nearly every month. I am certain that field staff are responding to inquiries to the best of their abilities; they are simply stretched too thin.

I sincerely hope the members of the committee recognize that all staff of the State Parks Division are highly dedicated to the resources and the public that they serve. I think it is largely to the credit of their dedication that the state park system has not yet cracked under the strain of recent economic realities. I know firsthand that all park staff are performing above and beyond the call of duty just to maintain basic operations. But running full throttle on fumes can't be sustained indefinitely. While we all certainly recognize and appreciate the many efforts that the committee has made over the years to support the agency legislatively and financially, I worry that even the most recent levels of funding are inadequate to sustain the mission of the division over time. I am hopeful that the members of the committee will endeavor to support the staff of the state parks division with same intensity that the staff of the state parks division supports the public resources that we all enjoy.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Douglas Linn', written over the 'Thank you,' text.

Douglas Linn
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