Re:
SB No. 215 An Act Concerning the Establishment of New State Parks

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Madison, CT 06443
Friends of CT State Parks Board of Directors, Past President
Friends of Harkness Memorial State Park, Board of Trustees

Dear Members of the Environment Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding SB 215. The Friends of CT State Parks, an 8000 member statewide coalition of 23 volunteer park advocate groups, wishes to express its very strong unequivocal opposition to the insertion of new restrictive language into existing statute regarding establishment of any additional state parks. This language obligates the State to hold public hearings in the town or towns within whose boundaries a state park is planned prior to its establishment and further requires that dedicated funding sources and a long- term fiscal plan be in place in advance of the hearings.

I daresay that had these kinds of provisions been part of law in the first one hundred years of the CT State Parks System, we'd be lucky to have 8 parks rather than our present 108, and perhaps none, as not one of our parks is self-sustaining. Not even mighty Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison with its 2 million annual visitors would pass the litmus test; it is not now, and has never been, self-sustaining. It is, however, a formidable economic driver that has significantly boosted the prosperity of regional businesses, enhanced nearby real estate values, and since its opening in 1920 immeasurably improved the quality of life of countless citizens over generations. All state parks, whether large or small, make these contributions to our economy and communal well-being. The multitude of benefits existing parks provide cannot be disputed and all, I believe, would acknowledge the integral role they can play in strengthening community bonds. The manifold values of the parks thus far created may be obvious to us today, but things may not have been so clear-cut to some of our forebears, especially if they were viewing possible preservation through a filter of narrow self -interest.

If the town fathers of Madison in 1920 had any inkling that 2 million sometimes raucous, multicultural visitors would someday descend upon their quiet exclusive town every year, they may not initially have been very pleased. They may have preferred that the gorgeous shoreline property be utilized in such a way that served only their town's needs, rather than those of the other 168 cities and towns whose tax money had secured its purchase. Madison's preferences might have run to development rather than preservation; its concerns could have been focused on defraying future budget shortfalls not on facilitating shared access to a precious natural resource. If Madison had the power by statute to thwart, undermine and

indefinitely delay the establishment of a state park that would be open to all, whatever their class or color, it may have utilized that power to slow any forward progress to an excruciating crawl. Certainly a well-heeled town like Madison could have marshaled a battalion of expensive legal counsel and consultants to control the pace of the process and embroiled state park proponents, and the State itself, in interminable costly litigation.

If the State by statute change is in essence required "to ask permission" of local governments before establishing a state park, opportunities for increased public sharing of our natural and historic treasures will be painfully diminished. The disposition of state assets, either purchased with state citizens' tax money or donated specifically for broad public use, will improperly become a parochial matter. Local partisan governments, whose small town committees are often appointed not elected, will be able to unduly influence the fate of properties which they do not own. It is a blessing to have stunning communal landscapes in any town; that fortunate town is certainly likely to benefit socially and economically by association. The lucky presence of those landscapes within its boundaries, however, in no way confers ownership or default control to that town. Or at least it doesn't now.

The Friends of CT State Parks implore you not to endorse SB 215 and institute this destructive change to statute. Do not try to fix something that is not broken and in the process seriously undermine a century old System universally loved by citizens. A change like this coupled with the unfortunate and increasing misuse of the Land Conveyance Bill to summarily confiscate state park and forest acreage for local pet projects, batters an institution deserving support not assault. Citizens need more parks not fewer; they look to you assure that our landscapes will remain truly shared in our next one hundred years.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony,

Eileen Grant
Friends of CT State Parks