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Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Support/ Oppose
COMMITTEE BILL 215: AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NEW STATE PARKS	Oppose

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For 120 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on sustainable forestry, state parks and forests, trail recreation, natural resource protection, and land conservation issues.

I am here today to testify in opposition to Committee Bill 215, An Act Concerning the Establishment of New State Parks. It feels strange to testify against a bill with such a promising-sounding title, but since CFPA has been a strong supporter of establishing new State Parks for over 100 years now, I must point out how this bill could actually damage opportunities to establish future State Parks.

Funding for State Park establishment, maintenance, and operation is hard to forecast. Over the past several years, funding for State Parks operations and maintenance has decreased, bonding for capital improvements has increased, and responsibilities for management have increased. With such schizophrenic funding scenarios playing out, how can the Commissioner be expected to confidently identify funding sources?

Sometimes you need to move quickly or a potential Park will be lost to development. Requiring a public hearing and detailed establishment plan would lengthen the timeline for Park establishment and potentially turn-off a landowner who may wish to sell or donate land to the State. Negotiations to establish a Park are already lengthy, and this bill could tip the balance against even the most patient landowner.

There are good reasons why negotiations over land purchases and donations occur in private. Establishment of a State Park involves a delicate partnership between a seller or donor of land with the State. The seller or donor may not wish to have a high profile public hearing or lengthy planning process, and the seller or donor may find it easier to simply sell the land that could otherwise have tremendous public benefits.

A municipality could easily have a conflict of interest with a potential Park property. If a politically active resident or member of town government is against a Park being established, it could set-up several potential conflicts of interest. For example, if a local citizen was interested in acquiring that Park property, they could use the public hearing process to sour a deal that would have been in the interest of the public.

State Parks are for all citizens, not just the residents near where the Park is located. It took 23 years to finally secure appropriations for Sherwood Island State Park in 1937 due to local opposition. Then, in the first year that the Park opened, it was visited by 146,000 people. Sherwood Island continues to be a key engine for ecotourism in Connecticut and our 108 State Parks attract 8 million people statewide each year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify! I would be glad to respond to any questions you may have.