

TESTIMONY OF ELISSA WRIGHT
Former State Representative, 41st District
Member, Thames River Heritage Park Steering Committee

***In support of S.B. 345 (RAISED), AN ACT CONCERNING THE WATER TAXI AT THE
HERITAGE PARK IN THE TOWNS OF GROTON AND NEW LONDON.***

Environment Committee Public Hearing – February 4, 2015

Senator Kennedy, Representative Albis, members of the Environment Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of *Raised S.B. 345, An Act Concerning the Water Taxi at the Heritage Park in the Towns of Groton and New London.*

The appropriation in this bill would build on the successful Thames River Heritage Park Water Taxi Demonstration Project conducted over two weekends last September which provided an on-the-water experience and alternative mode of transportation across the Thames River on water shuttle links between Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park in Groton, Fort Trumbull State Park in New London, and City Pier in New London for more than four thousand passengers.

The water taxi demonstration project was the most recent step in realizing the long-held goal of providing boat access linking together a network of dozens of historical, cultural, and recreational offerings in the communities of New London and Groton as a state heritage park focused on the rich maritime history and heritage of the area. The demonstration provides a solid foundation for more permanent and regular water shuttle service with the potential to invigorate heritage tourism, enhance the economy, and give residents and visitors a deeper understanding of the people, places, and traditions that have shaped the region.

This funding proposal is an outgrowth of 1987 legislation which created a system of state heritage parks within the state park system intended to develop new recreational opportunities in conjunction with the preservation and interpretation of the state's rich historical and cultural heritage. Statutory goals also include fostering economic revitalization, encouraging private investment, and promoting tourism.¹

¹ General Statutes §§ 23-10h – 10i, as amended by Public Act 14-43 (SB 314), *Act Concerning the Heritage Parks Advisory Boards*, which updated and provided a more flexible approach in the procedures for designation of state heritage parks by the Commissioner of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

As the prototype under that legislation, the Thames Maritime Heritage Park was dedicated at an official ribbon cutting celebration in New London on July 6, 1990. A water shuttle boat across the Thames River was envisioned as a key programmatic element of the heritage park. Portions of a \$2.6 million state bond allocation in 1990 to the then Department of Environmental Protection for design and construction costs associated with the park were used to construct a water taxi docking facility at Fort Griswold State Park and to design another docking facility at the Nautilus Memorial.²

Building on these and other formative activities of the 1990s,³ the Yale Urban Design Workshop, as consultant for the Avery-Copp House in Groton and working with state and local government officials, key interest groups, and potential affiliates in the nonprofit sector during the past two years, has played a pivotal role in catalyzing efforts to bring the Thames River Heritage Park to life as a heritage-based attraction encompassing affiliated historical, cultural, and recreational sites along the lower Thames River, with Forts Trumbull and Griswold, the USS Nautilus Memorial and Submarine Force Museum in Groton, and the anticipated National Coast Guard Museum in New London as anchor attractions, and an array of additional partner sites complementary to the mission of the heritage park.

Based on the demonstration project's success, rekindled interest in reviving the Thames River Heritage Park, and the importance of tourism in the state and regional economies, I respectfully urge you to support more permanent water taxi service between Groton and New London next summer.

Thank you very much for raising this bill. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Supporting document attached: "Water taxi makes a splash in New London, Groton" The Day, Sept. 6, 2014

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² Full implementation of the Thames Maritime Heritage Park eventually stalled. When the U.S. Navy donated Fort Trumbull to the state, \$1 million was diverted to development of Fort Trumbull State Park. Other remaining funds later were reallocated for repairs at Fort Griswold and Fort Trumbull State Parks.

³ In 1991 a Thames Maritime Heritage Advisory Board was organized and established. The board commissioned an extensive 1994 Thames Maritime Heritage Park Implementation Plan which outlined in considerable detail a pathway to implementation including a water taxi.