

Testimony of Penny Parsekian, Chair, Thames River Heritage Park Steering Committee on S.B. No. 345 (Raised) **AN ACT CONCERNING THE WATER TAXI AT THE HERITAGE PARK IN THE TOWNS OF GROTON AND NEW LONDON** before the Environment Committee, Feb. 4, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this legislation to provide funding for water taxi service between Groton and New London.

The Thames River Heritage Park Steering Committee, under the auspices of the Avery-Copp House and with the professional guidance of the Yale Urban Design Workshop, has been working for two years to update the original plans for a heritage park in the estuary and secure public support. The State of Connecticut in the 1980s and '90s invested over \$4 million in infrastructure and interpretation for the park but did not complete the job. We now have an opportunity, due to a more than \$100,000 gift by the Copp family, to use the new plans and finish the work.

A key to implementing the park is establishing the shuttle proposed for funding in the legislation. The Yale report describes the shuttle as “the primary means of circulating between anchor sites,” and as a solution “to the current fragmentary ... experience of visiting sites on both sides of the river,” which currently requires “the navigation of complicated access ramps and the highway bridge in a private car...” As the Yale consultants note: “The experience of moving between sites by boat will allow the visitor to see and comprehend the geography of the region from the dramatic vantage point of the water. ... making the transition between sites an integral ... part of the park experience, intimately related to the conception of the Park as being river-based.”

To test the viability of the water taxi, the Steering Committee ran a demonstration of the service over the first two weekends of September, 2014. The results were overwhelmingly positive. Cross Sound Ferry, which operated the service using a boat loaned by Mystic Seaport, counted 4,000 passengers on the various links of the three-stop voyage. The impact was dramatic. Visitation at some of the historic sites quadrupled, and small businesses along the waterfronts in Groton and New London experienced increased foot traffic and sales. The public response, which we captured using an on-line survey that garnered 221 respondents, indicated almost unanimous support for the service, with 96 percent indicating they would use the service again. The most recent in a string of letters to the editor of *The Day* in praise of the water taxi was Jan. 23, 2015.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the region needs the economic stimulus the park would provide. Southeastern Connecticut is lagging behind the rest of the state in the recovery. We urge you to take this small step to bring the park to fruition and build on the current momentum. Twenty-six regional stakeholders have written letters of support to complete the park, including major attractions such as Mystic Seaport, the heritage sites in the estuary, the municipalities and economic and business development agencies, such as seCTer, Renaissance City Development Corporation and the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern CT. All recognize the economic benefits and thoughtful framework for new development, plus a chance to capitalize on our rich heritage, that the park would provide.

Thank you very much for your consideration.