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

Table with 2 columns: Public Hearing Subject Matter, Support/Oppose. Rows include RAISED BILL 1061 and RAISED BILL 1062.

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 testifying today to express CFPA’s strong support of Raised Bill 1061 and Raised Bill 1062. CFPA’s Trail Stewardship Director, Clare Cain, is presenting testimony on the Recreation Trails Program bill, so I will focus my remarks on what I’ll call the “Parks Sustainability Bill.”

Last year was the Centennial Anniversary of the State Parks, the Program Review & Investigations Committee delivered an important report to the General Assembly on State Parks funding, and in model bi-partisan fashion, over 60 Legislators have now “adopted” State Parks and Forests in their Districts. Although there is strong public support for the State Parks, the budget for the State Parks has been anything but sustainable in recent years.

The State Parks shoestring operational budget is \$11.5 million for 107 State Parks. With 8 million annual visitors, the Parks generate over \$1 billion and 9,000 jobs for the Connecticut economy each year. For every \$1 spent on the State Parks, over \$38 is returned to Connecticut. Isn’t it time to make the State Parks sustainable?

This bill takes very important steps to improve the financial sustainability of our State Parks by establishing:

- A \$5 charitable donation that residents could opt out of every other year during vehicle registration.
• A dedicated State Parks Sustainability account where these charitable donations would be deposited.
• A sensible concessions arrangement that gives Parks more of a stake in enhancing opportunities for visitors.
• Increased fees for special events that better reflect costs incurred by the Parks to provide services.
• An opportunity for private individuals, organizations, and businesses to sponsor Parks.

Thank you for raising this important bill! I am glad to respond to any questions you may have.