

Testimony Re: HB 6824 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2017 and Making Appropriations therefore and other Provisions Related to Revenue

Budget for the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's State Parks Division

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Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for opportunity to submit testimony with regard to the funds allocated for the CT State Parks Division of DEEP in the proposed 2016/2017 Budget.

The proposed budget reduces funding for State Parks by a staggering \$2million in each year of the Biennium Budget.

This punishing cut will inevitably lead to park closures, drastically curtailed customer service, acceleration of infrastructure deterioration, increased law enforcement challenges, and a diminishment in collected revenues. This short-sighted self-destructive reduction will cripple a System utilized by 8+ million annual visitors and it will undermine Parks' critical role as a key economic driver in Connecticut's tourism industry.

\$2million equates to 17% of Parks total budget and more than a 33% cut of the parks' funds over which DEEP has control.

In year 2014, the State Parks budget was \$11.5million. Of that \$11.5 million, \$5.7 million was dedicated to funding 85 permanent positions for field and office staff; \$3.4 million was budgeted for seasonal personnel (about 550 persons working on average 2.5 months per year); \$2.4 million was allotted for operations (utilities, fuel, trash, leasing and supplies.) DEEP has decision- making power in just two of the three budget sections. As existing permanent staff positions are not presently subject to either elimination or lay-off, only seasonal positions or the operations funds can be affected by the proposed \$2million budget cut. \$2 million must be carved from \$5.8 million, over one third of the discretionary allotment. Operations budgets have been trimmed to the bone over the last decade. In all likelihood, the seasonal budget of \$3.4 million will absorb almost all the \$2 million loss.

Up to two thirds of the average 550 persons seasonal work force will not be in parks, this year or next, to clean bathrooms, mow lawns, man ticket booths, pick up trash, maintain campgrounds, patrol facilities, or serve as lifeguards.

The Park System in the last decades has become very heavily dependent upon seasonal workers in order to passably address the public's baseline service needs. There has been no choice but to rely on the seasonal staff as adequate funding and positions have not been provided to replace Parks' rapidly dwindling permanent staff.

The 2016/2017 budget, as well as decimating the seasonal work force, provides no remedy for replacement of the many park positions already lost to attrition nor considers the alarming numbers of staff soon to retire. On its present trajectory, the Park System by year 2020 will have only 37 staff remaining in the field.

As pointed out in last year's report by the Legislature's Program Review and Investigations Committee, additional funds are urgently required to help rebuild staffing numbers to levels sufficient to steward the Park and Forest System's 250,000 acres, maintain its 450 + buildings and most importantly to service its yearly 8 million patrons. At present, merely 77 full time field staff shepherd our parks; just 15 Park Supervisors and 53 maintainers directly care for these conservation properties and their visitors. Staff numbers in the last forty years have already steeply declined from a level of 185 workers in 1971. Our present level of 77 in no way approaches the benchmark of 205 full time field staff recommended by the 2003 Clough Harbour Report, an exhaustive impartial study focused on infrastructure and personnel needs in the Park System.

In less than five years time, Parks' tiny field staff will be further decimated by the exit of a large percentage of retirees. By 2020, only 4 of our 15 Park Supervisors and 29 of our 53 maintainers will not be eligible to retire; only 37 staff will remain to manage 108 parks and 32 forests. **In 2020, the number of field staff will be just 23% of levels of 40 years ago and just 16% of the number recommended by Clough Harbour to steward the Park System.** Without an immediate influx of new hires to begin to reverse this precipitous decline, the Park System will not be able to service patrons in all but a small minority of its properties in the very near future.

For decades, Friends groups have struggled mightily to shore up a Park System starved for resources. Friends' contributions of labor, goods, and funds have helped ameliorate the damage wrought by chronically insufficient state budget support. The proposed \$2million budget cut will likely lead to a commensurate decline in Friends' contributions.

The monetary value of the statewide Friends groups' substantial annual donation of volunteer labor is NEGATED by the proposed \$2million State Parks budget cut. 22 Friends groups EACH year donate 80,000 volunteer hours to enhance visitor experience in parks. The value of that annual labor contribution is estimated by the Independent Sector to be \$2.3 million.

In addition to labor, Friends donate a further average \$500,000+ in funds, goods and land acquisitions each year.

Friends' contributions have come through considerable personal sacrifice from groups' members. Friends have "hung in there" for so many years because all are acutely aware of parks' importance to every citizen, especially those with limited economic resources; Friends hoped, in leading by powerful example, that in time government decision makers would "wake up" and finally reverse the funding trends so terribly harmful to a beloved and worthy public institution.

The proposed \$2million cut to Parks' already paltry budget sends a message to all Friends volunteers that their efforts have been pointless. Insult to injury, the cut "zeroes out" the value of Friends labor contributions and signals that government leaders harbor an expectation that Friends volunteers will shoulder even greater responsibility for park operations.

The Friends volunteers should in no way be regarded as substitutes for staff. As personnel levels have dwindled, volunteers have increasingly found themselves assisting at parks in ways that are inappropriate either to their ages or skill sets. The majority of volunteers are retirees; senior citizens should not be attempting to execute tasks meant for young fit workers. A two thirds reduction in the number of seasonal workers (who are primarily high school and college students) will either further pressure older volunteers to take on unsuitable responsibilities or more likely prompt them to abandon the Park System.

The disproportionate reduction in Parks' funding is doubly perplexing to advocates as the Park System is already so cost-effective. The Park System services 8 million visitors at a net cost of \$5.1 million, 64 cents per patron. At the same time, Parks stimulate about \$1.5 billion in economic activity. By any measure, this is a remarkable level of positive performance. Costs cannot be further cut without seriously compromising Parks ability to help support the economy. Revenue and returns will diminish as facilities fall into further disrepair and as the public correctly perceives them to be unmanned and unsafe.

The proposed draconian budget cut disheartens volunteers, demoralizes efficient esteemed staff, and undercuts Parks' contributions to the economy. Most tragically, however, it ill serves those citizens who most depend on State Parks to provide affordable recreational opportunities. By failing to provide sufficient funds to keep Parks open, safe and clean, we telegraph a lack of concern and respect for Connecticut's poor that should embarrass us all.

PLEASE REVERSE THE UNWARRANTED AND DESTRUCTIVE \$2MILLION CUT TO THE STATE PARKS BUDGET.

Respectfully submitted,

**Eileen Grant, Friends of Connecticut State Parks Board of Directors
President 2007-2014**

THE STATE OF STATE PARKS
A Profile of the Connecticut State Parks System

The System is comprised of 107 State Parks and 32 State Forests

CT. Parks and Forests cover 250,000+ acres

CT. Parks and Forest properties contain 450+ buildings

Park & Forest Attendance Yr. 2014- 8+ million visitors

Camping Visits to Parks & Forests Yr. 2014- 26,294 Reservations
Number of camping nights occupied: 78,984; 335,682 Campers

Connecticut State Parks System Budget 2014- \$11.5 million

Expenditures:

Permanent Personnel- \$5.7 million

Seasonal Personnel- \$3.4 million

Operations (Utilities, Fuel, Trash, Leasing)-\$2.4 million

Revenue Collected 2014- \$6,393,933

Parking & Admissions Fees- \$3,988,601

Camping Fees- \$2,405,321

Parks' Division's Number of Permanent Field Staff Positions - 77

2 Operations Supervisors

15 Park Supervisors

53 Maintainers

5 Clerical

2 Environmental Analysts

Number of field staff eligible to retire by 7/1/15: (24)

***(11) Maintainers, (9) Park Supervisors, (1) Env Education
Coordinator (3) Clericals***

Parks' Division's Number of Full-time Hartford Staff Positions-8

Number of Hartford staff eligible to retire by 7/1/15: (3)

Average Number of Seasonal Employees Each Year-550

Average Duration of Employment- 2.5 months (late May- mid Aug.)