



## SouthEastern Connecticut Enterprise Region

125 Eugene O'Neill Drive, Suite 309 • New London, Connecticut 06320

Telephone: 860-437-4659

Facsimile: 860-437-4662 • E-mail: [secter@secter.org](mailto:secter@secter.org)

Testimony of Stephen MacKenzie, Executive Director, Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region 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.

In 1987, the State of Connecticut passed legislation to create a number of heritage parks throughout the state to bring attention to the state's rich historical and cultural heritage and to foster revitalization by encouraging private sector investment and tourism. The model for this network of parks was to be the Thames Maritime Heritage Park in the Thames estuary. SeCTer has participated on the Thames Maritime Heritage Park Steering Committee over the last two years and actively supports the revival and continuation of the important work initiated in the earlier Connecticut Heritage Park System study.

New London and Groton continue to have difficulty competing with other tourist destinations in part due to their struggle to create a cohesive image as a regional or national destination. The mission of the Heritage Park project is to provide and promote a comprehensive and cohesive linkage of current historic maritime visitor attractions thus providing a framework for regional tourism. This important place-making project also provides structure for regional cultural, educational, and economic development initiatives, as well as regional transportation and environmental management plans. An increase in visitation by both tourists and New London County *and* Connecticut Residents, can only positively impact the economy of our region and increase the sense of pride among our residents.

Today, the experience of visiting different sites is uncoordinated. By connecting the institutions and sites physically and programmatically, the whole will become greater than its individual parts. The structure provided by the creation of the Heritage Park will ensure the needed coordination, and the Water Taxi will get people out on the water so that they may understand the environment of, and the connection between the Thames River, New London and Groton. The water taxi is *essential* to the overall success of the Park as it facilitates convenient access to all the anchor sites in a way that eliminates the now fragmented experience of driving from site to site. Additionally, the Park is river-based, therefore visiting each site by boat allows the visitor experience it in the manner it was envisioned.

The trial run of the water taxi in September, 2014 was an overwhelming success. Cross Sound Ferry, which operated the service, counted 4,000 passengers on the various portions of the three-“port” trip. Public response to taxi service was also very positive with 96% of the 211 surveyed indicating that they would use the service again. Visitation at some of the historic sites quadrupled, the economic benefit to small waterfront businesses along both sides of the river were measurable.

Southeastern Connecticut is lagging behind the rest of the state in the recovery and needs the economic stimulus that the park and taxi service would provide. In 2011, seCTer prepared a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) which is approved by our Regional, State and Federal

Governments. The CEDS identified the need to "foster more heritage tourism in the region." This would be accomplished by improving signage for visitors; developing "heritage trails" attractive to tourists and fostering a sense of place in residents; invest in Thames River sightseeing and/or ferry service; and to develop new and improved recreational opportunities on the Thames River. The 2014 update of CEDS identifies the Park as a new project with regional significance and contains similar goals/action items to develop or enhance new and existing recreational opportunities on the river; increase shoreline access and water-dependent transportation and recreation; and to support investment in Thames River sightseeing and/or ferry service. The Thames River Heritage Park project is not only consistent with the CEDS goals, but may also help leverage support to implement additional existing downtown revitalization, traffic and circulation plans in New London and future plans for Thames Street in Groton.

By providing another major attraction in the region, tourists will be encouraged to extend their stay, creating additional economic opportunities for regional businesses. Studies have shown that "Historic Tourism" is among the fastest growing segments of the tourism market.

Specific to the Thames River Heritage Park:

- The state has already invested over \$4 million in infrastructure and soft costs to create the park. Costly components, such as water taxi docks, have been installed.
- Regional and city plans call for more linkages among sites.
- With Fort Trumbull State Park and the Avery-Copp Museum now open to the public and the US Coast Guard Museum slated to open in New London's Historic Waterfront District, the timing seems right to renew the effort to move forward with the park.
- Electric Boat's has expanded into New London, and UConn Avery Point students use dorm space at Mitchell College, therefore the need to shuttle employees and students across the river has created a new demand.
- Visitation at key neighborhood attractions has dropped, in some cases significantly, resulting in vandalism and providing the impetus to act.

Twenty-six regional stakeholders have written letters of support to complete the park because they recognize the economic benefits that would result from this chance to capitalize on our rich heritage. I therefore urge you to build on the current momentum and take this crucial step to complete the park by providing funding for the water taxi to enable its more permanent and regular operation.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,



C. Stephen MacKenzie,  
Executive Director  
Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region