

Testimony Re: Midterm Adjustments to the 2016/2017 Biennium Budget for DEEP and State Parks and Proposals to Alter the Protocol for Allotment of Funds to Agencies

Eileen Grant, Friends of CT State Parks Board of Directors
43 Neptune Ave.
Madison, CT 06443
eileencgrant@gmail.com

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony with regard to the budget adjustments and structural changes proposed by Governor Malloy.

While State Parks supporters do not yet know the specific ramifications for the State Parks budget which will result from the 5.75% cut (\$4 million) to the budget of the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, we would be naïve to believe that Parks, a frequent target for budget reduction would not be negatively impacted. As State Parks are already in such a weakened position due to decades of underfunding, any diminution in funds is disproportionately felt.

Just last year a draconian cut of \$2.4 million was proposed to State Parks meager \$18.5 million budget (including fringe benefits). Had the legislature not overturned this proposal and restored \$1.8 million, it would have been necessary to reduce the seasonal park work force by 2/3. A reduction of that magnitude would have necessitated the closure or non-servicing of all but the most visited water body parks.

The seasonal budget, certainly, will still be under threat with an agency 5.75% cut. Perhaps more disturbing is the likelihood that with the Governor's call for reductions in work force size, rapidly retiring park employees positions will be not re-filled. Full time positions to replace the many that have already been lost to attrition and retirement in the last 30-40 years are even more remote possibilities.

As pointed out in the Legislature's Program Review and Investigation Committee Report of two years ago, additional funds are urgently required to 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, approximately 75 field staff shepherd and maintain our parks. Staff numbers in the last forty years have already steeply declined from a level of 185 workers in 1971. Our present level of 75 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 four year's time, Parks' tiny field staff will be further decimated by the exit of a large percentage of retirees. On the present trajectory, with no refills authorized or former positions restored, by 2020 approximately 40 staff will remain to manage 109 parks and 32 forests. In 2020, the number of 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 properties in the very near future.

For decades, Friends groups have struggled mightily to shore up a Park System starved for resources. Friends' substantial contributions of labor, goods, and funds have helped ameliorate the damage wrought by chronically insufficient state budget support. Friends' members however, cannot continue to contribute at our present levels, especially in terms of labor.

Friends' volunteers should in no way be regarded by anyone in State government as substitutes for staff. As personnel levels have dwindled, volunteers, the majority of whom are over 60, have increasingly found themselves assisting at parks in ways that are inappropriate either to their ages or skill sets. Senior citizens ought not to be expected to do work that should be handled by the young and fit. Any further reduction in the number of seasonal workers or failure to refill positions will either further pressure older volunteers to take on unsuitable responsibilities or more likely prompt them to abandon the Park System.

Advocates of Parks are not unrealistic about the difficulties of the present budget situation and have tried our best to help over many years, but none can deny that State Parks have suffered in a disproportionate way in past decades, and as a consequence, now skirt dangerously close to becoming non-sustainable. We would ask that when the details of the DEEP budget become known that you take a hard look at the State Parks allotment and assure that personnel funding does not diminish further.

The "block grant" to agencies concept gives advocates great pause. We do think legislators play a very important role in the budget process, lending perspective and over-sight. We worry that an acceptable degree of transparency will not be maintained if all critical decisions are made by the executive branch and within agencies. Being able to keep close track of individual line items and programs helps keep everybody honest; checks and balances are necessary. It's not healthy to place too much power in any Governor's hands; it is not realistic to think that many appointed Commissioners would be truly independent enough to say "no" should their opinions differ significantly from those of their boss or OPM about agency priorities. The present Commissioner, Robert Klee, we know to be a true supporter and advocate of State Parks. We have the hope, at least, that he will do his best in a terribly challenging fiscal climate to limit damage to the Park and Forest System.

We might not be so fortunate in our next Commissioner. We will always need the Legislature to help safeguard our precious natural public landscapes and insure that citizens will be able to enjoy them in comfort and safety.

Respectfully submitted,

Eileen Grant
Friends of CT State Parks Board of Directors