

Testimony RE:

HB 5585: To establish a state parks sustainability account for the maintenance and operation of State Parks and fund such account through the diversion of certain funds from unclaimed bottle deposit funds and the Citizens' Election Program.

SB 384: To apply the bottle bill to wine and liquor containers and designate unclaimed deposit refunds from the sale of such containers for the operation, maintenance, and repair of State Parks.

SB 386: Requesting CT DEEP to recommend a dollar amount for a per-person admission fee to state parks that will leave the state competitive with surrounding states while generating increased revenues for the maintenance and operation of State Parks.

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Dear Senator Kennedy, Representative Albis and members of the Environment Committee,

Our 109 state parks are in urgent need of protected and dedicated funding. The current levels of funding are insufficient to maintain and staff the parks. Any further cuts, as the current budget forecast seems to foretell, will be disastrous.

Our state parks are a precious resource and deserve to be properly protected and maintained. The Parks provide recreation, access to nature and nature education to state residents. They also attract tourists from other states and even countries. The Parks are an asset to be treasured and supported, not an expense to be cut. They create revenue. An economic study completed by U. Conn. found that for every \$1 spent on the State Parks, \$38 is generated into our economy. Hammonasset Beach State Park, for instance, had more than 335,000 cars through the gates in the 2015 season. The Park has 553 camping sites and 8 cabins. The sites are 100% booked on every weekend throughout the summer camping season and are more than half booked on weekdays. A majority of the people paying the parking and camping fees believe that the revenue is supporting the park system. People that are not aware of the fact that all revenue goes to the General Fund are stunned when they hear this truth.

As proposed in HB 5585, the establishment of a State Parks Sustainability Account for the maintenance and operation of State Parks is a necessity. There are many options from which the funds for the account can be generated. Some of these (i.e., bottle deposit funds in SB 384) can be seen as a tax and may not be popular. The per-person admission fee proposed in SB 386 will be an admission fee increase for many families and could become a barrier to visiting the parks. It would also face many administrative issues in practice. For instance, under/over what age would be free and how would ages be checked and evaluated, cars reenter the park under one day's admission fee so what happens if they reenter with more passengers? It seems that there are so many loopholes to application that it is not an easy policy to administer.

I believe that the best place to look for new sources of funds is from within the parks. This is no way a suggestion to raise entrance and camping fees but instead to look at what else can be offered to enhance the Park experience for visitors.

Some suggested ideas:

- Sell Parking Passes for overnight parking in visitor lots of campgrounds. Many families need one more car than is allowed on a camping site.
- Sell one day licenses for food trucks. This would benefit parks that do not have food concessions. In Parks with food concessions, offer the licenses on days that typically see visitor levels beyond the capacity of the onsite concession.
- Offer more trailered boat launches in parks and charge for a launch pass. Visitors to Hammonasset, for instance, need to drive from Madison to Guildford for the closest State operated trailer boat launch or use a private launch.
- Add a per reservation surcharge (voluntary or mandatory) to any reservation made through the State Park online reservation system (contracted through Reserve America). Reservations are made for picnic shelters and campsites and cabins.
- Add an additional fee designated for State Parks on all boat and camper registrations.
- Add an option to donate to state parks on the CT State Income Tax form.
- Restructure the concession contracts so that the concessioners either pay a rental fee for facilities or contribute a portion of their sales to the State Park Sustainability Account.

An idea that was proposed in the last session that deserves to be revisited.

- Add an opt-out donation box on vehicle registration forms. This is an idea currently used in other states.

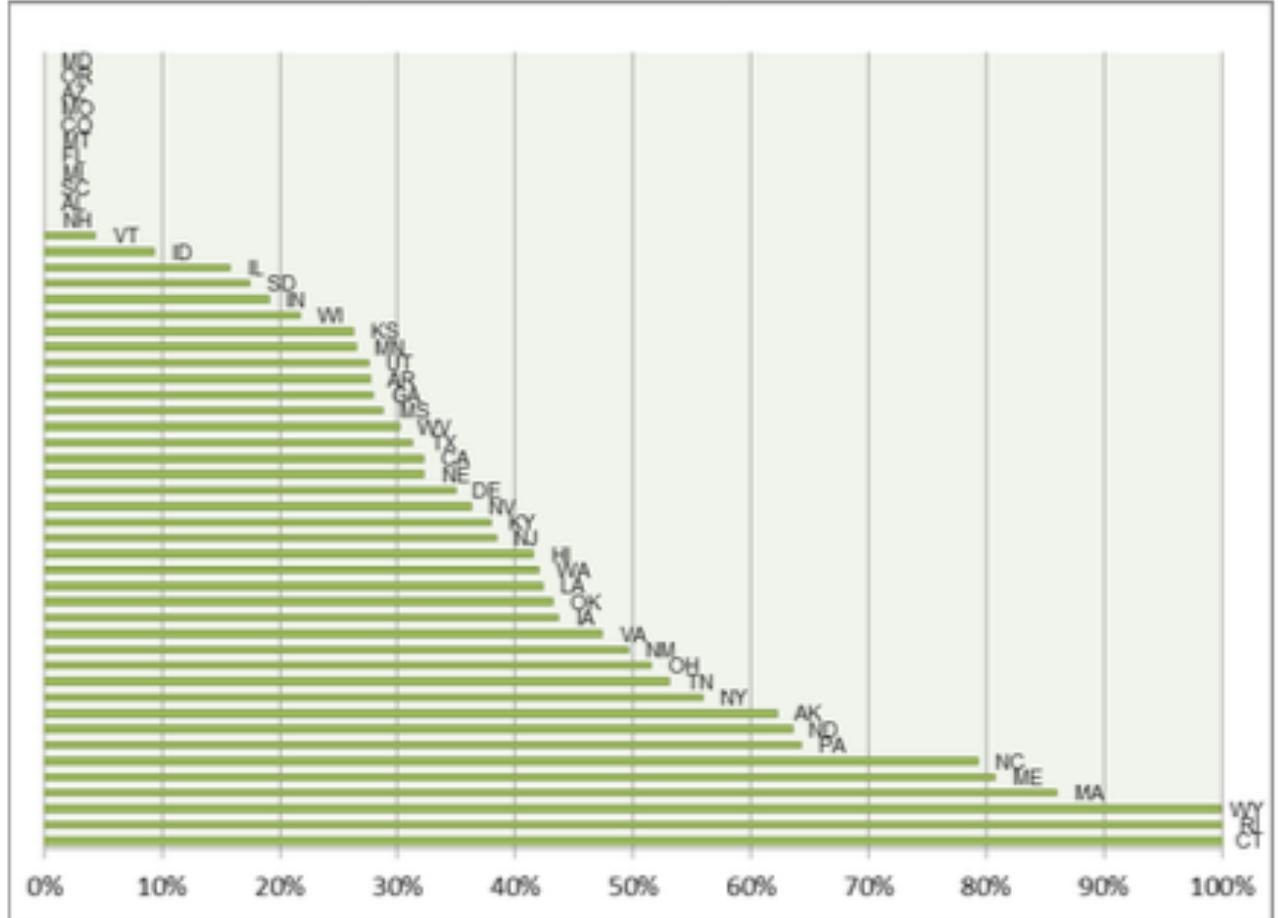
Thank you for proposing a Bill that would create a sustainability account for Connecticut State Parks. Please consider funding methods that will not be seen as a tax.

Sincerely,

Michelle Kiley
VP, Friends of Hammonasset

Below is data from a state park funding study (Walls, Margaret. 2013. Paying For State Parks: Evaluating Alternative Approaches for the 21st Century. Washington, DC: Resources for the Future. <http://www.rff.org/files/sharepoint/WorkImages/Download/RFF-Rpt-Walls-FinancingStateParks.pdf>) supporting the fact that Connecticut needs to revisit funding State Parks from the General Fund, introduce a dedicated fund and come up with ways to support it other than by raising taxes and increasing fees.

Figure 1. Percentage of FY2011 Park Operating Expenditures from General Fund Revenues, by Individual State



Source: National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD), Annual Information Exchange, FY2010-2011.

General fund revenues as a share of total operating expenses have declined over the past two decades. Figure 2 shows the average percentage coming from each of the three main funding sources for selected fiscal years since 1990. General fund revenues have declined from 59 percent in FY1990 to 34 percent in FY2011. Most of this decline has been made up by an increase in dedicated funds. Park-generated revenues have provided a roughly constant share of park funding since FY1995. Nationally, since FY2005, park-generated revenues have supplied the largest source of funding, greater than both general revenue funding and dedicated funding. Figure 2 also shows total operating expenditures in inflation-adjusted 2011 dollars, which have increased slightly since FY1990.⁶ Expenditures peaked in FY2007 (not shown on the graph) and have declined since then. These national figures over a two-decade period mask some dramatic movements for some individual states over particular time periods.