

Environment Committee – Hearing March 11, 2016  
RB 386: AAC The Fiscal Sustainability of State Parks

Testimony submitted by:  
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Chairmen Albis & Kennedy and Members of the Environment Committee:

I currently serve as President of the Friends of Connecticut State Parks (FCSP), representing 24 Friends Support Groups with approximately 6,000 volunteer members statewide.

While the Friends of CT State Parks applaud the effort to solidify a sustainable revenue stream for the CT State Parks System, we are very concerned that a per person admission fee would create a greater liability for the parks and increase the number of lawsuits as the “Landowner Liability For Recreational Use Land Statute” protections would no longer apply.

The following are offered as potential alternative options to generate revenue for Connecticut’s State Parks and Forest recreation areas: (It should be noted that none of the suggestions will be worthwhile for the parks if a Dedicated State Parks account is not established for these revenues.)

**State Park Concessions:**

The State Park concessions are currently operated by Board of Education Services for the Blind (BESBE). All net revenue earned at the concessions goes to BESBE with no return to the State Parks. This was not always the case. Prior to BESBE taking over the food service, camp stores and vending machines, concessions were competitively bid and revenues were split with the State Parks system and the Concessionaire. The Concessionaire maintained the buildings, provided money to the state and still made a profit. At that time, the concessions did a brisk business and were popular with park crowds. Business has dramatically declined under BESBE’s operations. Bidding out concessions to successful business men and women could return the concessions to profit making enterprises for both the parks and businesses.

**Iron Rangers:**

The FCSP strongly urges the installation of Iron Rangers in the less actively managed facilities or, those facilities which charge only on the weekends.

CT currently charges a parking fee at 25 State Parks on weekends and only 10 during the week. At least Four of the 25 Parks used to charge during the week but can no longer justify having staff in a ticket booth for a low return of revenue. (Kittletown, Stratton Brook, Wadsworth Falls, Wharton Brook). Three water-based parks (Day Pond, Gardner Lake and Bluff Point) have no charge at any time. The state still incurs the cost to maintain these sites even though there is no charge.

Iron Rangers are utilized in State Park systems across the country and by the National Parks Service, Bureau of Land Management and US Forest Service to augment revenue charged for parking. Most of the northeast states use them with the exception of Connecticut and Rhode Island. States that use Iron

Rangers generally charge a minimal, whole dollar fee ranging from \$1 to \$5 since most units are low tech and do not make change. Folks who have a season pass or a Senior Pass do not have to pay additional to use the Iron Ranger facilities.

Iron Rangers offer an opportunity to recoup lost revenue and require little if any maintenance. They generate enough revenue to cover the cost to maintain the facility in which they are located and the staff to retrieve the cash envelopes from the Rangers. In some cases, they could turn a profit.

**Charter Oak Passes (Lifetime Park Passes issued free to those CT residents who are age 65 or greater.)**

People in CT are living longer and have more disposable income at age 65 or older. The Friends of CT State Parks are recommending that a nominal annual charge be implemented for the pass. (Suggestion: \$10-\$30). The State Parks Division absorbs the costs associated with printing, processing and mailing the Charter Oak Passes. The nominal charge would recoup the expenses and still provide a lifetime's worth on enjoyment to our older citizens. (Note: CT's neighboring states - Massachusetts State Parks implemented a \$10 fee in 2015 to obtain a Lifetime State Parks Pass and Rhode Island State Parks charge \$30/year for Seniors)

**Cabins Rentals**

Build additional cabins to be rented by campers. The Rustic Cabins have been extremely popular with Campers. At \$70/night (\$80/night for out-of-state residents), they are in high demand and sell out rapidly. The revenue from these rentals has gone to the General Fund. Perhaps the existing cabins rentals can be grandfathered with revenue going to the general fund. The rental money from any new cabins could go to the Dedicated Parks Account. Other state park systems also rent tents, Yurts, campers and other types of overnight accommodations.

**\$5 Opt-out Donation attached to Motor Vehicle Registrations**

The FSCP supported this concept when it was introduced in 2015. While it was not successful during that legislative session, the FCSP would like to see the same Bill re-introduced. This could be one of the most predictable sources of revenue to sustain the State Park and Forest Recreation areas. Many other State Park systems around the country are supported with revenues from Motor Vehicle registrations.

**Bottle Bill and Recyclable Plastic Bag Fees**

While additions to the Bottle Bill and a 5 cent charge for use of plastic bags have not been supported in the past, financial times in CT are nearing crisis stage. Next fiscal year is predicted to be even more dire. FCSP suggests reintroducing these two options to as a means to address likely park closures and the elimination of many popular outdoor education programs the park goers currently enjoy.

I hope these suggestions have been useful. Please consider these as alternatives to implementing a per person admission fee.

Thank-you.

