

Testimony Re: Raised Bill 386 An Act Concerning the Fiscal Sustainability of State Parks
Raised Bill 5585 An Act Establishing and Funding a State Parks Sustainability Account
Raised Bill 384 An Act Concerning the Application of the Bottle Bill to Wine and Liquor Bottles for Purposes of Funding State Parks

Eileen Grant
43 Neptune Ave.
Madison, CT 06443
eileencgrant@gmail.com

Dear Chairs and Members of the Environment Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on bills that have been raised to help better fund State Parks.

The Friends of CT State Parks very much appreciate the Environment Committee's steadfast efforts to try to find new means to assist the struggling Park System and to construct a pathway toward assured future sustainability. It's no easy task, especially in this fraught budget climate.

Bill 386 is very well intentioned, in that it seeks ways to enhance needed park revenues, but I foresee a number of problems that would come as a result of a per person fee structure at parks.

There are liability issues for the State if an admission fee vs. a parking fee is charged in State Parks. An admissions fee does not confer the same protections as a "visit at your own risk" parking fee; the State would be so much more vulnerable to legal actions from visitors.

A per person fee, as well as escalating liability, could prove to be highly disruptive, particularly in the high volume parks in which parking fees are charged. Having been a volunteer in State Parks for 20 years, I have witnessed innumerable times, the difficulties entailed in collection of parking fees at the gates of our parks with heavy visitation. Traffic back-ups on summer weekends in our shoreline and lakeside facilities are commonplace even after every effort has been made by DEEP staff to keep collection of the fees simple and streamlined. Any anomaly or customer service issue can snarl up the works and slow circulation to a halt. A complication like the ridiculous imposition of the sales tax on park fees last season can create a winding line of frustrated, overheated and angry patrons in moments.

The delays created by the imposition of the sales tax would be minor relative to the hold-ups which would result from a per person fee structure. The seasonal workers at the gate would be required to peer into every car, count heads, possibly differentiate by age group, then make separate dollar entries for each person into

the cash register. The extra time required for each transaction multiplied by thousands of cars (at places like Hammonasset, Rocky Neck, or Sherwood Island for example) would dramatically compromise efficiency and negatively impact visitor experience. Our young high school and college- aged seasonals at the gates would take the brunt of patron ire as they did with regard to the sales tax. Our parks are so short staffed that care must always be taken not to make workers' tasks any more onerous than they already are. Further, a per person fee could inspire a fair number of patrons to get creative and figure out how to game the system by evading head counts.

I also fear that a per person fee would have the unintended consequence of discouraging some families, particularly the economically disadvantaged with a number of children, from coming to the parks. Often multiple generations of a family (grandparents, parents and grandchildren) arrive in one vehicle to conserve money on gas and pay the one admission they can afford.

I would favor different avenues for enhancing park revenue. I thought a number of the ideas in last years Sustainability Bill, the \$5 opt-out Park donation option on car registration renewals, and a total reform the Concessions award process, for example, were very good and deserve to be revisited. I also think that in a resource starved Park System the practice of giving a free lifetime pass to senior citizens at age 65 is just not sustainable particularly in light of our rapidly changing demographic. Retail and restaurant merchants offer discounts to seniors, they do not provide free merchandise. I think it would be more than fair to ask seniors to pay at least 50% of fees in order to help insure that our parks and forests will endure for this and successive generations. I believe seniors, in general, are really quite philanthropic and would readily pay discounted fees if they were assured that those revenues would remain with Parks to sustain operations.

Thus, the need to establish a dedicated non-lapsing State Parks Sustainability Account such as that proposed in Bill 5585 is critical. Requesting that citizens pay a little bit more to enjoy parks is only palatable if visitors see marked improvements in personnel levels, in maintenance of crumbling infrastructure and in provision of the nature programs that were historically offered state-wide. A flow of revenue to the General Fund does not accomplish these goals, or it certainly hasn't done so for decades.

A push to reform the irrational Concessions process, and to develop fund-generating services that might be much more attractive to visitors than those in place, will be of little use unless enhanced revenues directly roll back to Parks and are deposited in a protected fund. Otherwise, ambitious enterprise initiatives simply burden a work force already well past the breaking point. Park staff has no incentive to take on additional responsibilities if there is no guaranteed return and if the promise of rebuilding the State Park System is absent.

If the Government does not or cannot directly fund Parks at appropriate levels, at the very least, they should facilitate Parks' generation of new income and should insure retention of those additional revenues the Parks network has raised and earned through innovation. The State Park and Forest System needs a protected non-lapsing fund.

When the Environmental Conservation Fund, the repository for park and sporting fees, was swept into the General Fund in 2010 by Governor Rell, Parks' vital cushion against damaging budget fluctuations was removed. It was promised by the executive branch that this change would result in an increased budget for the severely underfunded Park System. In 2011, and every year thereafter, however, the Parks' budget decreased. The cumulative drop in funds available to support Parks and Forests has already been dramatic. The looming budget cuts and personnel reductions, through attrition and layoff, may truly shut down most of the System. Establishing a secure repository for a combination of grants, new park fees, the fruits of park enterprise initiatives, and corporate or private donations, is a necessity if the System is to stave off collapse.

Respectfully submitted,

Eileen Grant Friends of CT State Parks Board of Directors