

Veterans' Affairs Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-7136

AN ACT EXEMPTING VETERANS FROM THE PASSPORT TO THE PARKS

Title: MOTOR VEHICLE REGISTRATION PROGRAM FEE.

Vote Date: 3/12/2019

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 3/7/2019

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Veterans' Affairs Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

Created in Public Act 17-2, the Passport to the Parks program waives the parking fee at all Connecticut state parks for any Connecticut registered vehicle. To offset the loss in revenue, a \$10 fee was added to the standard two-year registration renewal. Prior to the implementation of the Passport to Parks program, Public Act 11-68 extended a free lifetime pass for state parks, forests, and recreational facilities to any resident who is a disabled wartime veteran. The pass for disabled veterans allowed free parking, admission, and boat access parking. The implementation of the Passport to Parks program fee essentially nullified the previous benefit to disabled veterans.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[Katie Dykes, Commissioner, Department of Energy and Environmental Protection:](#)

Commissioner Dykes cited DEEP's appreciation and support of the intention behind H.B. No. 7136, but stated two reasons why the department could not support the bill. First, the newness of the Passport to the Parks program means time is needed to determine how much the program contributes in terms of revenue to sustaining operation of the state parks system. Second, the commissioner testified that DEEP estimates exempting all veterans would result in a reduction in available funding of around \$1 million per year.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

[House Republican Office](#): The House Republican Office testified that those who served in the military should not have to pay the \$5 per year fee to enjoy unlimited access to all of Connecticut's state parks.

[Carol A. Hall, Representative, Connecticut General Assembly](#): Representative Hall testified that since disabled veterans were already granted free access to parks in Connecticut, the Motor Vehicle Registration Fee would require them to pay for something that was previously free when registering and renewing their vehicles.

[Daniel C. Thurston, Chairman, Connecticut Veterans and Military Coalition](#): Mr. Thurston testified that the CVMC supports H.B. No. 7136.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

[Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director, Connecticut Land Conservation Council](#): Ms. Paterson testified that Connecticut's state parks attract approximately nine million visitors every year, generating over \$1 billion annually for the state's economy. As a result, the CLCC worries that by chipping away at the funding for the program, a precedent is set that could be disastrous for our state parks. The CLCC stated that at a time when the state is looking to address budget shortfalls, it would not be prudent to undermine a fee structure that supports a proven source of revenue.

[Eileen Grant, Co-President, Friends of CT State Parks](#): Ms. Grant testified that the fee amounts to no more than \$10 during each two year period, and that in return it offers unlimited access to state parks, which previously could have cost as much as \$13 per park per visit. This has permitted lower income families, as well as disabled persons and seniors, to visit enjoy Connecticut's natural resources. Ms. Grant stated her concern that by chipping away at the funding for the Passport to the Parks Program, the generated funds will no longer be able to cover expenses and the program will go under, greatly limiting access to those who most benefit from it.

[Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest and Parks Association](#): Mr. Hammerling testified that the biennial \$10 fee ensured that all people, including veterans, were able to visit any state park in Connecticut, and that compromising the funding for the program could destabilize something that has already proven to be effective.

Reported by: Benjamin S. Watson, Asst. Clerk Date: March 15th, 2019