

Testimony Re: Bill 295 An Act Concerning the Selection of Caterers for Individuals Who Rent State-Owned Venues

Eileen Grant, Co-President Friends of CT State Parks
Board of Trustees Friends of Harkness Memorial State Park
43 Neptune Ave
Madison, CT 06443
eileencgrant@gmail.com

Dear Members of the Environment Committee,

I offer this testimony in strong opposition to Bill 295 .I speak from the perspective of one who has closely observed the complex logistics necessary to facilitate the very successful Mansion Rental Program at Harkness Memorial State Park, instituted in 1998. I have been a volunteer at the Park since 1996.

The unintended consequence of Bill 295 will be assured damage to the sensitive State Parks' historic buildings that are available for rental, and a fostering of unsafe conditions for the regular park patrons who visit their state parks before and during rental events. Presently, there are very stringent and necessary rules and regulations in place to protect our landmark buildings and guarantee visitors' safety. These protective measures were refined over a long period in response to knowledge gained in the initial years of the rental programs; these regulations, including those governing caterer selection, help to guarantee that the true purpose for which the enterprise rental programs were launched is fulfilled not undermined. That purpose is to raise revenue sufficient to keep vulnerable park structures in proper repair.

The Park System, as everyone knows, has been chronically underfunded for decades. Last on the list of priorities for budget expenditure has been repair of its historic structures. To their great credit, the Parks Department sought means to help self-fund the maintenance of these expensive buildings and chose a difficult labor - intensive initiative to accomplish that goal. Park personnel, who were certainly not trained to be wedding event coordinators, taught themselves how to implement and execute this ambitious plan. By any measure, the staff at Harkness Memorial State Park has exceeded all expectations for the Mansion Rental Program. Today staff oversees 60 -80 wedding events per year in the Harkness Mansion and another 20-25 on the Harkness grounds. Rental receipts in the neighborhood of \$8 million over 22 years have generated profits that have kept the Mansion to restoration standard, have furnished funds to maintain the landmark gardens, and allowed a partial restoration of the former estate' s expansive 1910 greenhouse complex. They have helped Harkness underwrite its equipment costs, to plant replacements for century old trees lost to age and extreme weather, and to complete many other projects large and small that have enhanced visitor experience and preserved the property for future generations. None of these park improvements would have been remotely possible had this longstanding program not done two

things – 1. Maximize its profit through cost control, consistently high standards in building condition and excellence in service and 2. Minimize any risk to the vulnerable historic resource, so expensive to repair should renters or their vendors carelessly abuse the venue.

The rental of State Parks' historic buildings is a business; it is not a park service. Offering these particular rental venues for weddings and parties is not part of the Parks Department's mission statement. It is a means to an end, not the end itself. If Harkness did not desperately need substantial revenue to appropriately maintain itself, it would not host weddings at all; the sole use of the Harkness Mansion instead would be as a museum.

Any citizen has the right to enjoy and visit our communal natural resources and may, of course, rent available facilities. Any and every un-vetted for profit caterer does not have the same assumed right of access to sensitive historic buildings.

The only criteria in Bill 295 for rental by any and all caterers is that "information required by the commissioner for approval" must be submitted "not later than twelve months prior to the date of such rental." In other words, provision of a liquor license and an insurance policy (not necessarily even current at the time of the rental event) would suffice to determine whether a vendor is appropriate to a site. If criteria does not stipulate extensive past experience operating in historic structures, or does not require that the product mix offered by a vendor is matched to the specific venue, then it is meaningless.

The vetting process for vendors as was originally conceived, and as exists today in improved form, evaluates precisely those criteria. The team who must judge and rank candidates is peopled in large part by the personnel who actually manage the myriad of events. All members of the team have intimate knowledge of the particular historic buildings and landscapes. Chosen vendors must be educated about the vulnerabilities of the properties by this same team- Staff could not possibly "train" or educate an unlimited number of one time vendors in an open ended time frame to a degree sufficient to assure protection of the historic resources.

The catering contract is opened every few years. It affords all caterers the opportunity to submit bids; the bids are thoroughly evaluated within a prescribed/limited period on many pre-published criteria. If caterers do not meet all criteria, they are not chosen. It is a fair, open and transparent process.

All other premier wedding venues in the area, whether they be State run or private have preferred/restricted caterer lists. Through years of experience, all have come to the realization that to provide excellent service in their facilities, control of the biggest variable, the caterer, is essential. One bad caterer, one unhappy couple, one negative online review can result in depressed revenue for years. Reputation is everything.

Bill 295 will undermine the painstaking work of over two decades. It forces adoption of bad business practices and most alarmingly, leaves the Park System's irreplaceable historic structures open to costly damage.

Respectfully submitted,
Eileen Grant, Co-President Friends of CT State Parks
Board of Trustees, Friends of Harkness Memorial State Park

Additional Notes:

Presently all preferred caterers at Harkness must have experience working in historic buildings. The Mansion's hallways are narrow, party guests are seated at tables in multiple period rooms as no single room has a seating capacity over 80 persons. Harkness does not have a working kitchen; food must be prepared off site and delivered along with much associated equipment to the Park on a very tight schedule. Typically, there are three events per weekend during the height of the season. Caterers must be very familiar with the Mansion, grounds, and access roads to efficiently operate within designated time frames, and also not endanger park goers. Harkness has 250,000 visitors annually; it is a small park, the main area only 150 acres in size: usage is concentrated in limited space. To familiarize yourself with the layout of the buildings and grounds at Harkness and get a true sense of the property's beauty and limitations, please visit harkness.org, the Friends of Harkness website.

Per regulation, Sec. 23-4-17, caterers have insurance requirements that must be submitted to the Commissioner at least 90 days in advance. The requirements are lengthily and specific. Tracking compliance for unlimited vendors is not a realistic expectation to require of Park staff. Additionally, "the caterer is required to have a liquor permit issued pursuant to Section 30-37j of CT General Statutes." Caterers are in charge of all alcohol on the premises and critically, it is they who must enforce responsible consumption.

A Further Note:

Last year, this very same bill was put forth for public hearing. The sponsoring legislator submitted the bill in response to a complaint by one of her constituents, a local caterer. In autumn 2019, this same caterer participated in the most recent open bidding round for vendors. The caterer was chosen in an open and fair process as an approved vendor for the Rocky Neck Pavilion. The caterer was not ranked high enough to secure a place on the more necessarily restrictive Harkness Mansion list.

See harkness.org for further information about Harkness Memorial State Park and also a link to the State's Harkness Wedding Brochure