

# Veterans' and Military Affairs Committee

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-5205

AN ACT CONCERNING VETERANS AND THE PASSPORT TO THE PARKS

**Title:** MOTOR VEHICLE REGISTRATION FEE.

**Vote Date:** 2/16/2023

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable

**PH Date:** 2/7/2023

**File No.:**

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### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Veterans' & Military Affairs Committee

### REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill exempts veterans from paying the Passport to the Parks fee collected on new and renewal motor vehicle registrations. It requires that anyone seeking the exemption present to the DMV commissioner or his authorized representative documentation that confirms their veteran status.

### RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director, Connecticut Land Conservation Council:](#)

Supports this bill

The Passport to the Parks Program generates dedicated revenues to support the operation and maintenance of Connecticut State Parks, Forests, and Wildlife Management Areas (collectively "State Parks"). Beyond these economic benefits to the state and local communities, State Parks enhance quality of life for Connecticut residents, providing free opportunities for recreation and access to nature – and the physical and mental health benefits that access provides. Allowing this exemption will not only result in the loss of dedicated annual support for the parks system, but it could also lead to a "slippery slope" of similar requests from other categories of users. The Passport Program is working as intended.

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

Opposes this bill

The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection recognizes the tremendous service and the sacrifices of our veterans and those presently serving. However, we oppose this bill since Connecticut's State Parks depend on the Passport to the Parks Program to fund the operation of state parks and forests. We estimate that exempting all veterans from the Passport to the Parks motor vehicle registration fee will result in a reduction of funding by approximately \$1.3 million per year. Since the pandemic, DEEP has experienced a 75% increase in visits to CT State Parks. An estimated 17 million visitors enjoyed Connecticut's State Parks and Forests in 2022. Inflationary costs and higher seasonal staff wages in 2022, which are further increasing in 2023, caused operational costs to rise. Without the financial support from Passport to Parks, DEEP would not have been able to keep parks open and operating throughout the pandemic. The Passport to the Parks program provides a stable, predictable funding source to support the operations of our state parks and forests. Decreasing the revenue used to run state parks by more than \$1 million per year would cause service curtailments across the state park system.

**Eileen Grant, Board of Directors, Friends of CT State**: Opposes this bill

If veterans were to be exempted from the Passport fee, approximately \$1.4 million (7% of total annual revenue) would not flow to the Passport Fund. It likely would be a greater loss than \$1.4 million as ownership of cars could be shifted by some from one household non-veteran member to another one who is a veteran, avoiding a \$5 fee for either. A \$1.4 million loss to the Fund is very significant. Parks might have to hire even fewer desperately needed full time workers to replace retirees. They might be forced to mothball more buildings, repair less aging infrastructure etc. The Fund is already far too lean to meet real need. The Passport Program will only eventually generate sufficient funds to cover System costs if ALL citizens who register an automobile contribute

**Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association**: Opposes this bill

There are several reasons why CFPA is opposed to HB 5205, which would result in a direct cut to funding available to operate and maintain State Parks. First let me be clear that CFPA recognizes and honors America's veterans. My father and grandfathers served in the armed forces, as have many volunteers and staff who have been leaders within our organization. They were proud of what they did for our nation and the greater good. At the same time, this proposal would harm the state parks system they loved, and in my opinion, falls short of honoring the greater good for which they fought so nobly. More people are visiting State Parks than ever: Every year since the Passport to the Parks began in 2018, more people have been getting to State Parks every year. Park attendance in 2021 was estimated at over 17 million visitors. To cut State Park funding now (when operations and maintenance needs have both increased and are greater than ever) makes no sense. The Passport to the Parks \$5 fee is reasonable. This fee is especially reasonable considering that before the Passport went into effect, just one weekend visit to a shoreline State Park would cost any Connecticut resident \$13 for just one visit. State Parks support Connecticut's economy: In 2021, outdoor recreation in Connecticut contributed \$3.9 billion to our GDP and supported over 44,000 Connecticut jobs (U.S Dept of Commerce: ORSA). Investment in State Parks, trails, and other outdoor recreational resources is an economic force multiplier that HB 5205 would undermine. Before the Passport to the Parks, State Parks and campgrounds were on the

brink of collapse: The Passport to the Parks went into effect in 2018 because 4 campgrounds had been closed and State Parks were threatened with moving to “passive management” (i.e. no people to keep parks and campgrounds safe). Returning to a time when State Parks and campgrounds are both over-reliant on the general fund and threatened with closures would be unacceptable. If you exempt Veterans, who’s next? Exempting Veterans or any group from paying this fee could open the floodgates for other groups to request an exemption, and the revenues generated by the Passport would be quickly whittled away.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

##### **Representative Mark DeCaprio, 48<sup>th</sup> District, Connecticut General Assembly:**

I have heard from many Veterans on this issue. The purpose of this legislation is to provide a financial benefit to our Connecticut Veterans who honorably served our country by protecting our country's freedom, our independence and our democracy. This bill is one way to express our lasting gratitude to the sacrifices that our Veterans made to defend our country so that we can live free.

##### **Representative David Labriola, 131<sup>st</sup> District, Connecticut General Assembly:**

As a direct result of this program, Connecticut veterans, who comprise a mere 5% of the state population, are disproportionately burdened. Many of the state’s veterans have endured numerous sacrifices in service to their country and take refuge in the state parks as a form of recreational therapy. Since some of Connecticut’s veterans live at or below the poverty level, the imposition of the fee required by the program is inhibiting our veterans from receiving the healing benefits at our state parks. I urge the Veterans’ Affairs & Military Committee to pass this bill to allow veterans to access Connecticut state parks free from the burden of the Passport to the Parks registration fee.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

None submitted

**Reported by: Robert Mayne**

**Date: March 6, 2023**