



State Parks and Forests: Funding

Background

In June 2013, the program review committee authorized a study of Connecticut's state parks and forests. The study focuses on funding of the state park system, including a comparison of system revenues and expenditures and an assessment of the adequacy of funding to support short- and long-term operational needs.

State parks were first established in Connecticut 100 years ago, under the supervision of the State Park Commission. Now under the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), there are 139 state parks and forests (255,000 acres) providing public outdoor recreation areas in the state. While several bureaus and divisions within DEEP are involved in parks, park operations are handled within the State Parks and Public Outreach Division (Parks Division) by a combination of park supervisors, maintainers, and seasonal employees.

The state park season runs from Memorial Day to Labor Day, though park operations extend beyond these months. During the season, 35 (of 139) parks charge fees for parking, admission, or camping. Fee levels are set by regulation and can vary by location, residency status, and time of day. The last fee change occurred in 2010. Prior to FY 10, a portion of the revenues from collection of park fees was used by the Parks Division through a non-lapsing special fund. Since FY 10, park-generated revenues have gone to the General Fund.

A variety of data collection methods were used to conduct the study, including a review of financial and informational documentation provided by DEEP and interviews with DEEP staff as well as knowledgeable persons and interested parties outside of DEEP. Nationwide state parks comparison data were also reviewed and selected other states were interviewed.

Main Findings

The Parks Division FY 13 budget expenditure level is comparable to the level of FY 06 using constant 2013 dollars. Although several funding sources exist, the system has become heavily reliant on the state's General Fund, with little directive or incentive to focus on revenue generating activities.

Connecticut's state park fees are at or above other states in the region. There has been a decrease in paid attendance following fee increases in FY 10. The percentage of use by residents (~80% of day use) was not impacted by the fee increase.

Staffing levels are down and have reached a critical point regarding operations. Several management units do not have permanent, full-time supervisors. Connecticut's use of seasonal workers exceeds the national average.

Planning for the state park system has defaulted to "crisis management" as the level of resources available to parks has decreased. Though there is some collection of data, information is not analyzed and park performance is not measured in meaningful ways to fully inform planning and resource allocation.

Either an increase in funding and staffing or a decrease in services is necessary for continued adequate state park operations in the long-term. It is possible the current service offerings can be maintained with new, lower levels of staffing and funding for a short while longer. However, it is unlikely the current situation can be maintained indefinitely as the current balance relies on deferring maintenance, which may lead to increased future costs.

PRI Recommendations

Recommendations are made throughout the report in support of the key improvement areas mentioned here. In order to enhance planning efforts, **the Parks Division should perform regular reviews of all park resources and annually track park performance through the development of a Results Based Accountability report card.**

Specific recommendations contribute to the recommended reviews and report card, including **requiring measurement of three key areas: attendance, safety, and customer satisfaction.** The major aspects of individual parks to be considered during each park review are: staffing needs; the use and level of fees; and the condition of existing facilities.

A portion of park-generated revenues should be appropriated to the Parks Division, contingent upon demonstration of park performance through the RBA process. The division must develop a plan for use and distribution of this increased funding. Any appropriated park-generated revenue should not supplant existing General Fund monies.