

Testimony Re: HB 6439 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023 and Making Appropriations Therefor

Budget for Conservation and Development Agencies/ DEEP/ State Parks Division

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Dear Members of the Committee,

My name is Eileen Grant. I am Co-President of the Friends of CT State Parks (FCSP) and I write to you on behalf of my organization a statewide coalition of 29 all volunteer Friends groups, with an overall 7000 person membership dedicated to the protection and enhancement of the CT State Parks and Forest System.

This past year has opened many more eyes to the vital importance of nature and outdoor recreation in enhancing physical and psychological health. In this stress filled pandemic period, open space, and in particular, our State Parks, Forests, and Trail Systems, provided opportunities in abundance for citizens to temper anxiety. Those seeking a bit of carefree normalcy found respite, chances to exercise, and safe places for their housebound families. The institution of the Passport to the Parks in 2018 happily gave these CT patrons free admission for an unlimited amount of visits. In droves, citizens took advantage of this program in every corner of the State. Prior to the institution of the Passport, an impressive 10 million persons visited facilities annually. In the two years following, 2019 and 2020, patronage increased 10% in each of the years. Even with Parks operating in 2020 at 50 % capacity in order to safeguard visitors' health, visitation skyrocketed.

Especially for persons and families of limited means, or for those who had lost or been laid off from jobs, the Passport was so welcome. People were able to visit daily instead of once or twice a season and find relief from the heat and virus constricted environments. Seniors, understandably anxious about close contact, could easily "socially distance" and take much needed walks and swims without fear. Every age group was a little more relaxed, a lot more fit and a good deal more resilient due to its visits. This year our Parks, Forests and Trails truly became everyone's big beautiful backyards.

In future years, one can predict that the practice of seeking these places out will be habit and memories of days spent there in this taxing time cherished by families. Children, who many feared could never be separated from their "devices", learned the joys of the outdoor world, hopefully for a lifetime. Parks' advocates are more than certain that usage of our public lands will grow exponentially with passing decades due in no small part to exposure to them in this last year and to the overwhelming popularity of the Passport. It's vital, therefore, that this program continue to be universally supported and its funds protected.

With increased visitation, comes the need for greater resources, particularly of staff. The Passport was supposed to provide the State Parks Division with the ability to begin to gradually build back its greatly diminished personnel levels. In the last 30 years, staff numbers have fallen by 2/3 while visitation and acreage have doubled. Only 75 full time workers (supplemented by 400-550 seasonals) service approximately 11 million patrons and manage 250,000 acres. A hiring freeze has precluded any meaningful build back. Although the original legislative intent was that the managers of the self-contained Passport to the Parks program determine the pace of staff enhancement within the limits of the Fund's own budget, this freedom has not yet been afforded. Only the already established positions of retirees have had any chance at all for refill.

In addition, the requirement that the Passport Fund underwrite all fringe benefit costs for the staff attached to the Fund, as opposed to the rules governing General Fund positions across every agency, cuts the Passport's "buying power" or its ability to supplement Parks staff in half. Bearing fringe costs increases position expense by 100% and translates to 50% fewer possible staff hires. With staff strength at such an abysmally low level already, this obviously will undermine patron services and System's operational efficiency going forward. The Friends ask that you consider a change in the manner that fringe costs are debited from the Passport Fund and thus help the Parks System better address the needs of its millions of visitors, this pandemic year and every thereafter.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Respectfully submitted,

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