

Parks and Recreation Commission

Town of Darien

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March 16, 2022

TESTIMONY TO OPPOSE H.B. 5361 - AN ACT CONCERNING PUBLIC ACCESS TO CERTAIN COASTAL RESOURCES

Dear Chairman Cassano and Chairwoman McCarthy Vahey, Ranking Members Needleman and Goupil, and esteemed members of the Planning & Development Committee,

The Town of Darien Parks and Recreation Commission (Commission) understands that H.B. 5361 was raised with the best of intentions, but we must oppose it as this proposal challenges our economic reality and the safety of our residents and beaches.

The Town of Darien's goal is to keep our parks and beaches open and inclusive to all. We welcome visitors from across the Nutmeg State and the nation. This Commission does our very best to maintain our beaches to ensure the safety of our visitors and the environmental safety of our beaches.

The cost to maintain the Darien beaches is far higher than the seasonal operating expenses, which includes the offering of amenities, insurance, and staff and far higher than parking fee collections. To maintain the safety and health of our beaches, significant capital expenses are also routinely incurred. These include, but are not limited to, renovating or rebuilding facilities and the surrounding parks that are regularly exposed to harsh coastal climates. As storm damage has increased in severity due to climate change and as FEMA has increased its regulatory requirements, these operating and maintenance costs have expanded rapidly. Such costs include upgrades necessary to improve the resiliency of the properties such as raising the parking lot due to flooding, building out dunes, remediating wetlands and tackling invasive species that threaten protective trees and shrubs. Two recent proposals we have received to maintain our two public beaches, Weed and Pear Tree, cost \$1.9m and \$3.1m, respectively. Such expenditures will be borne exclusively by Darien taxpayers, not by the State of Connecticut. Unlike

certain other municipalities, Darien has not requested nor received any state funding in the past to support our beaches.

All visitors are welcome at Darien beaches, either by walking-in or via ride sharing services. During the summer season, Darien Parks & Recreation sells a seasonal parking permit to residents, or charges for a daily parking pass for non-residents. This bill, if passed, would significantly expand demand for parking at our beaches and permits. Darien beaches are actually very small relative to other coastal towns, and there is limited parking during peak summer periods even for Darien residents. We have limited access to both Darien beaches through narrow roadways. Any increase in demand may cause town residents to be denied parking access at Darien's local beaches, as well as potential environmental damage. As a town we are also committed to supporting our newer residents, and we also anticipate more resident beach visitors as additional multi-family housing developments come online in the next year. We must acknowledge that residents are funding the costs of aforementioned operations and special projects through their property taxes. Therefore, local residents deserve priority for parking spaces.

Darien Parks & Recreation issues a daily pass for non-residents for \$53 per vehicle. Each visitor can enjoy the beach and our multiple amenities offered for the whole day for as little as \$10. This is not an exorbitant amount for any recreation facility. The differential of fees established by Connecticut's State Parks currently charges \$5 per year, per car registration by the DMV and non-state residents are issued a pass for \$112 per year. Differential fees are also a practice currently employed by the University of Connecticut, where in-state tuition is \$15,000 versus \$37,000 for out-of-state residents. Why are municipalities being asked to charge out-of-town/ out-of-state residents at the same rate as town taxpayers?

We hope you will consider the unintended consequences of HB5361. By limiting our ability to establish appropriate fees for our beach parks, we may not be able to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our beach visitors nor make the appropriate improvements to ensure their long-term viability. Again, Darien beaches welcome all visitors, but we respectfully ask the Committee to reconsider this bill as its proposed methodology is inconsistent with Connecticut's state programs and the safety of our most precious resources. We respectfully request that the Committee not approve this bill.

Sincerely,

Darien Parks & Recreation Commission