

# Environment Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-5009

**Title:** AN ACT CONCERNING THE PUBLIC SAFETY CAPACITY OF STATE PARKS.

**Vote Date:** February 17, 2023

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 1/30/2023

**File No.:**

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## **SPONSORS OF BILL:**

Environment

## **REASONS FOR BILL:**

To establish a capacity of state parks to protect the public.

## **Joint Favorable Substitute:**

To only represent Squantz Pond in New Fairfield

## **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

### **Katie S. Dykes, Commissioner, Department of Energy & Environmental Protection:**

Commissioner Dykes testified that this bill would require DEEP to establish existing capacity limits of state parks through a regulatory process which normally takes a year or more to create. Parking capacity limits are already established and to amend such capacity limits by regulation will eliminate the flexibility that the department needs to react to changing circumstances and adjust capacity limits is not practical for parks that border public trust areas and there for we oppose the bill.

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

### **Representative Patrick Callahan:**

Representative Callahan testified how much this bill is needed due to the overcrowding at Squantz Pond in New Fairfield. Local town officials have been told that the issue of overcrowding can only be done legislatively. Representative Callahan testified that how on a typical summer weekend cars will line up as early as 4:30 to get into the park and once the parking lot is full the park is closed. Visitors then park illegally causing traffic issues, blocking roads and causing concern among first responders.

### **Paul Aresta, Executive Director, Council on Environmental Quality:**

Paul Aresta testified about the Council on Environmental Quality a nine member board that works independently of DEEP. Visitations to Connecticut's state parks has increased since the establishment of the Passport to the Parks Program and this bill will enhance public safety in our state parks. The Council recommends additional resources and increase in filled positions be allocated to DEEP to enhance the physical infrastructure within the parks.

### **Lori Shaw:**

Lori Shaw submitted testimony in support the bill because of the concern of the number of people that are allowed in the parks with minimal police monitoring.

### **Kristine Hall, First Selectman, New Fairfield:**

Kristine Hall testified that living a few miles from Squantz Pond State Park the park is heavily used in the summer for picnics and recreation which causes a threat to public safety. Due to a series of drownings in the early 2000's DEEP imposed a limit of 250 cars allowed in the park but no limit on walk-ins so people park wherever they can and walk into the park. This causes the roads to get so clogged that emergency vehicles would have a problem getting through.

### **Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association:**

Eric Hammerling testified that the bill has some technical problems but does highlight an important issued faced by our state parks. Eileen Grant's describes in her testimony the technical problems that will continue to be ongoing until there is adequate staff and enforcement agents. Lack of staff and funding is leading to unsafe conditions for the public. It is unsustainable and unrealistic to continue adding more responsibilities to the park managers.

### **Pamela Bonner:**

Pamela Bonner testified that as a resident who travels Route 39 constantly, the traffic caused by out of state people attempting to access Squantz Pond State Park is extremely hazardous.

### **Lisa Sun:**

Lisa Sun testified as a former resident that valued the opportunity to engage and debate issues in my local community. This bill hopes to maintain open and public space as a foundational value that makes our democracy real.

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

### **Eileen Grant, Director, Friends of Ct State Parks Board of Directors:**

Eileen Grant testified that public capacity limits already exist for most State Parks, and these are periodically updated and limited to the number of cars that fill designated parking lots. The general rule is one car equates to four patrons and on average 9 to 12 parks reach capacity but as many as 20 to 25 may reach capacity a few days each summer. There is not enough staff to count visitors as the level of workers has fallen by two thirds in the last four decades, but visitation has almost tripled in the last ten years. A staff of 70 fulltime workers cares for 17.4 million visitors. Please do not burden this workforce with unneeded and duplicative regulations.

**Reported by: Pamela Bianca**

**Date: February 22, 2023**