

Environment Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-5216
AN ACT CONCERNING THE SAFETY CAPACITY AT GARDNER LAKE STATE
Title: PARK.
Vote Date: 3/8/2024
Vote Action: Joint Favorable
PH Date: 2/28/2024
File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Environment Committee
Rep. Kevin Ryan, 139th Dist.
Rep. Kathleen M. McCarty, 38th Dist.
Rep. Holly H. Cheeseman, 37th Dist.
Rep. Irene M. Haines, 34th Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

Gardner Lake State Park, located in Salem Connecticut, is a popular destination for visitors seeking to enjoy days outside at Connecticut's parks. During good weather (especially during the summer months) the park is prone to overcrowding. The safety risk, as well as the traffic congestion caused by the many groups who come from out of town to visit, is causing concerns in the community. This bill seeks to enforce a limit on the number of park enjoyers on busy days with the objective of remedying the issues caused by crowding.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Commissioner Katie S. Dykes, Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection

DEEP opposes this proposal primarily because of concerns on enforcement limits and the conflict with the goals of the state park system.

The Commissioner understand the concern of communities where disruptive impacts to traffic occur near the entrance to a state park such as Gardner Lake State Park. However, these

impacts tend to occur only on a very limited number of days each year, and that DEEP currently turns automobiles away once capacity has been reached. It is the Commissioners belief that the expanded enforcement of capacity limits to include pedestrians and watercraft visitors would be unfeasible under current staffing and funding levels, with barrier infrastructure a requirement to be able to enforce the limits.

The Department suggests an alternative of coordination with community leaders to allow for plans to be developed for those summer days where capacity is reached.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Ed Chmielewski, First Selectman, Salem, CT

The First Selectman expresses the belief that the current seasonal conditions at Gardner Lake State Park and Boat Launch are unsafe and dangerous. He recounts complaints about quality-of-life issues, excessive alcohol consumption, illicit drug use, noise problems, trespassing, and other dangerous conditions. The Selectman also states that they currently hire off-duty state police to operate on days in which capacity is breached and there are insufficient on-duty officers to help.

The Selectman requests that the CT State Police and DEEP create an agreement and a budget to allow CT State Police Troopers to work overtime shifts at the Gardner Lake Park and Boat Launch that is funded and budgeted by DEEP if Environmental Conservation officers (EnCon) are not available.

Representative Holly Cheeseman, 37th District

Representative Cheeseman provides a brief summary of the safety and social concerns at Gardner Lake, with alcohol consumption, over congestion of the water and beaches, and parking congestion being three of the major issues. The Representative also notes the financial costs associated with current management; up to \$3000 a weekend was spent on police overtime and tow truck coverage.

Representative Kathleen McCarty, 38th District

Representative McCarty testifies to many of the issues covered by representative Cheeseman and First Selectman Chmielewski, such as the safety concerns from overcrowding.

Representative Irene Haines, 34th District

Representative Haines calls for many of the changes the other Representatives and First Selectman have endorsed, including calling for increased numbers of EnCon officers to help reduce drinking and jet-ski issues.

Chris Bennett, Indianfield Campgrounds, Salem, CT

The Campgrounds have been operating in Gardner Lake State Park for over 35 years; the testimony recounts the many issues that they have encountered during busy days at the park. The testifier states that despite "No Trespassing" signs being used, many of the campground's community members have to spend time protecting from trespassers. The

testifier echo's the testimony from the Representatives and First Selectman, calling for increased EnCon officers.

Cynthia Marrero

The testifier makes note of the safety to the public and residents posed by overcrowding. They recount how their family and visiting swimmers have been put at risk; they state that a young boy drowned in what they attribute to part of the overcrowding problem.

Mary La Sala

The testifier expressed support for the bill.

Tamara Smith

The testifier expressed support for the bill.

Maizie Ogren

The testifier expressed support for the bill.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None Expressed.

Reported by: Judy Ganswindt

Date: 3/19/2024