



# 2017 CONSERVATION AGENDA FOR THE LAND & PEOPLE OF CONNECTICUT

## 2017 POLICY PRIORITIES

- 1.\* Support necessary second passage of a Constitutional Amendment bill that would protect State lands from being sold, traded, or given away by the Legislature without appropriate public process.
2. Maximize retention of healthy trees in the public right of way and ensure public notice requirements are followed.
3. Support authorizing legislation (a.k.a. "Project Green Space") that would enable municipalities to collect up to 1% of real estate conveyance fee on buyers to support local open space and farmland acquisition as well as park, forest, and trail management projects.

## 2017 FUNDING/RESOURCE PRIORITIES

- 1.\* Publicize impacts to the public and critical conservation programs from enacted and proposed state budget cuts.
- 2.\* Establish a new, secure source of funding for State Parks operations and maintenance.
3. Protect the integrity of the Community Investment Act (CIA) fund against raids and earmarks.
4. Support bonding for the State Recreational Trails & Greenways Program, Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition program, Farmland Preservation Program, and Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Fund.
5. Support funding and positions at CT DEEP essential for managing and acquiring parks, forests, and open space lands.
6. Support key Federal programs (e.g., Forest Legacy; Land and Water Conservation Fund; No Child Left Inside Act; New England Trail funding through the National Park Service; the U.S. Department of Transportation/FHWA Recreational Trails Program and others) that further the conservation of forests, open space, and trails.

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\*Detailed write-ups on priorities with an asterisk are found on the following pages.

# CFPA's 2017 Conservation Agenda Priorities Analysis

## **POLICY PRIORITY #1: AMEND CT CONSTITUTION TO PROTECT PUBLIC LANDS**

Resolution Act 16-1 – “A Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the State to Protect Real Property Held or Controlled by the State” – was passed in the 2016 session (as Senate Joint Resolution 36), and, as required for proposed constitutional amendments, must be passed a second time to allow the public to vote on this important referendum question in 2018.

This Resolution would amend the state constitution to require that State-owned public lands must receive a public hearing and a two-thirds vote before being given away, swapped, or sold by an act of the General Assembly. In our region, Maine, Massachusetts, and New York constitutions already include similar protections for public lands.

It is important to note that this constitutional amendment would not change the existing statutory processes that allow State agencies to administratively transfer public lands or convey surplus lands. These processes are well-summarized on the CT Council on Environmental Quality website on the page entitled “Guide to the State Lands Transfer Process.”

Following are a few critical reasons why a more public process for selling, swapping, or giving away public lands is necessary:

### **Honoring Land Donors**

Many public lands were donated to the state by families and individuals with the expectation that their generous gifts would benefit the public. A public process is an important way to ensure that the history of the land and donor intent be considered.

### **Preserving Benefits**

Public lands are important to protect air and water quality, provide wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities, and serve as demonstration areas for positive land management. A public process helps to consider what values could be lost, and how potential losses would be mitigated or avoided.

### **Protecting Valuable Assets**

State Parks like Hammonasset Beach or Talcott Mountain draw tourists, increase home values, improve public health, harbor wildlife, and both attract and keep businesses in Connecticut. Our state may be in fiscal crisis now, but thoughtful protection of public lands should help the economy rebound.

### **Securing State Investments**

Public land is one of the best investments we have made in Connecticut over the past 100 years. State Parks and Forests attract over 8 million visitors, generate over \$1 billion, and support over 9,000 jobs every year. The public lands that provide these and other benefits should not be given away without due consideration and public input.

### **Providing Places for Everyone**

Public lands benefit those who have less. Many in Connecticut cannot afford to travel to the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, or Yosemite National Parks. Connecticut's State Parks and Forests, most of which are accessible for free, are our local places for inspiration and an important part of our legacy to our children and future generations.

# CFPA's 2017 Conservation Agenda Priorities Analysis

## FUNDING PRIORITY #1: SAVE SEASONAL WORKERS AND AVOID IMPACTS

Connecticut's State Parks draw 8-9 million people each year and are one of our most important economic, historical, and recreational assets, but they are chronically underfunded and now rank 49th in the country in the percentage of the overall state budget that they receive. Parks are also 100% reliant on the General Fund (only one other State in the nation is funded so lopsidedly), and are extremely vulnerable to cuts in tough times.

If CT DEEP is forced to reduce its General Fund budget by 10% in FY 2017-18, they would have to eliminate all seasonal workers. Seasonals perform a majority of DEEP's critical field functions, collect entrance fees, maintain public lands and buildings, and are the least expensive personnel with minimal fringe benefits, but their positions are completely reliant on the General Fund.

**Without seasonals, the General Fund would lose over \$6 million in Park and Campground entrance fees and other revenues which they currently collect.**

Eliminating seasonals would also impact public health and safety, recreation and facilities maintenance, and ultimately hurt CT's economy in the following ways:

### Public Health and Safety Impacts

- 8-9 million annual visitors to State Parks and Forests would be on their own without lifeguards, trash collection, or public services. No wetlands management to respond to an outbreak of mosquito-borne disease such as Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) which occurred in CT in 2013.
- No beach/water quality monitoring or informing the public when water quality is hazardous.
- No safety patrols by seasonal workers at campgrounds, boating areas, parks and forests, and other areas to help focus DEEP's understaffed environmental law enforcement officers.
- To clean up hazardous materials spills or investigate environmental violations.

### Public Recreation & Facilities Impacts

- All campgrounds would be closed, and DEEP would only be able to staff a limited number of park facilities for supervised day use only.
- Fish stocking and hatchery operations would be dramatically reduced, and no field data would be collected on the health of freshwater fish or their habitats.
- No Child Left Inside, the Summer Fishing Program, which provides outdoor education and urban fishing experiences, and other popular programs for families would end.
- Public amenities like the new nature center at Hammonasset Beach SP, museums, and nearly all park buildings would eventually be closed to the public.

### Economic Impacts

Economic benefits currently generated by State Parks, Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, boat launches, and other facilities could be lost if these public assets become liabilities through neglect. Benefits include:

- CT State Parks generate ~\$1 billion/year and support 9,000 jobs.
- CT Forests (state and private) generate ~\$3 billion and support 13,000 jobs annually.
- In Connecticut, 1,570,000 people participate in fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching activities which generate a combined \$1.67 billion every year.

## FUNDING PRIORITY #2: GENERATE REVENUES FOR CONSERVATION

To avoid cuts like eliminating seasonal workers that would hurt Connecticut, the General Assembly and Governor should support ideas, such as the following, that would generate revenues and permit revenues to be placed in a dedicated account for Parks to protect the value of CT's investments:

**Passport to the Parks** - A \$10 charge added to 2-year DMV Vehicle Registrations would generate \$14.3 million/year in new revenues for State Parks, offset the proposal to eliminate seasonal workers and seasonal operating costs, and help stabilize the level of service provided by Parks. For \$5 per year, all residents with Connecticut vehicle registrations would get unlimited access to the State Parks and Forests. For comparison, one visit to a shoreline Park is \$13, and a season's pass to the State Parks is \$67. This would help CT DEEP redistribute more seasonal workers to managing land, wildlife, and water resources for the public since fewer seasonals would be needed to staff entry gates.

**Dedicated Conservation Account** - If State Parks and Campgrounds were able to use the \$6 million they generate to maintain and improve Parks, they would be incentivized to be more entrepreneurial and provide additional or improved services to the public. A dedicated conservation account (which existed before it was swept in 2009) funded by revenues generated by the Parks and Campgrounds would also help CT DEEP plan further ahead in hiring seasonal workers and meeting ongoing operations and maintenance needs that bridge fiscal years. New revenues, such as rental fees for the cabins built for the State Parks 100th Anniversary; and other relevant sources could be directed to this Conservation Account.

**Iron Rangers or EZ-Pass** - It is worth investing in Iron Rangers, or another suitable technology such as an EZ-Pass that would enable people to pay a parking fee without having seasonal staff standing in toll booths all day. This would operate similar to the parking machines currently used in many towns that provide a receipt that you could put on your dashboard. There would be some moderate up-front equipment costs, but it would enable the State Parks to re-allocate their staff resources from toll booths at less well-visited parks, and generate revenues through adding Iron Rangers at State Parks that currently do not charge parking fees. These funds would have to be placed in a non-lapsing dedicated account for the program to pay for itself and then pay dividends for the Parks.

**Eliminate Free Park Passes** - The current policy of providing free Charter Oak season's passes to citizens over 65 is well-intentioned but is simply not sustainable. Connecticut is the 7th oldest state in the nation with a current median age of 40.5 years. Also, Connecticut residents rank 3rd in the nation for good health and longevity. More than 15% of our population is older than 65 today, and that percentage is expected to grow more than 100% over the next few decades. A discount on park passes is reasonable, but free passes are an unnecessary drain on state resources. Another option is to raise the age of eligibility for these special passes from 65 to 70 or even 75. Of course, if the Passport to the Parks is adopted, all expenses associated with Park passes can be eliminated.



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