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Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

**Public Hearing Subject Matter**

**H.B. 7148: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2021, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.**

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For nearly 125 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various State Park and Forest, trail recreation, forestry, and land conservation issues.

I am testifying today on the Governor's Budget for FY 2020-21 to both express enthusiastic support for the Passport to Parks, and share a few concerns about the Community Investment Act. This Committee was instrumental in launching the Passport to Parks in the budget adopted in October, 2017, and the benefits of the Passport were felt throughout the 2018 calendar year. As you may recall, before the Passport to Parks, General Fund budget shortfalls at DEEP led to closing 4 campgrounds, reducing hours and services at various park facilities, and the specter of park closures or management by benign neglect was very real.

In 2018, thanks to the Passport, Connecticut residents enjoyed free entry to their state parks and forests, attendance of ~9 million visitors increased by an estimated 10%, all campgrounds were open, appropriate levels of public services were restored at park facilities, and the parks were safer and better cared for than they have been in years. Passport funds in 2018 were dedicated to funding seasonal workers -- notably maintainers and lifeguards -- who care for park facilities and grounds, and are critical for public safety. In addition, the Passport's status as a non-lapsing fund gave Park managers the ability to plan ahead and commit to hiring seasonal workers earlier than in previous years to ensure parks were appropriately maintained throughout the Spring - Fall season.

Primarily funded by a \$10 DMV registration charge, the Passport supports park maintenance, the Council on Environmental Quality, and Soil and Water Conservation Districts. In addition, the Governor's Budget proposes new expenses for the Passport account -- \$2.6 million and \$2.8 million in FY 2020 and 2021 for 35 full-time park maintainers formerly funded by the General Fund, and \$100,035/year in seasonal expenses formerly funded by the Special Transportation Fund. The Passport to Parks is working and we support the Governor's Budget proposal.

When left intact, the Community Investment Act also works to support open space, farmland, historic preservation, and affordable housing priorities as well as provide a safety net for dairy farmers. However, the Governor's Budget appears to move the CIA Account into the General Fund as line items in various agency budgets capped at certain levels. This may result in ~\$7 million or more being diverted annually from the CIA account to the General Fund. The CIA was established to be an off-budget account funded by document recording fees for specific priorities, and we are concerned that this budget proposal appears to put what should be stable CIA funding on shaky ground.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I'd be glad to respond to any questions you may have.