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16 Meriden Road  
Rockfall  
Connecticut 06481-2961  
Tele: 860-346-TREE  
www.ctwoodlands.org

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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
<b>Raised H.B. 6642:</b> AAC A STUDY OF ACCESS TO MUNICIPAL-OWNED BEACHES AND PARKS.	Support

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

I am testifying today to express CFPA's support for Raised HB 6642, "An Act Concerning a Study of Access to Municipal-Owned Beaches and Parks."

Ever since reports were issued by the Connecticut Park Commission in 1913 and 1918, ensuring access to Connecticut's shoreline for the public has been a top statewide priority.

Since that time, almost 8 miles of beach access along Long Island Sound has been protected by State Parks (notably Hammonasset, Rocky Neck, Seaside, Sherwood Island, and Silver Sands State Parks), but that represents only ~2% of Connecticut's shoreline. This public beach access is rare and continues to be a top priority to protect. Most of Connecticut's remaining shoreline is privately owned, but a considerable amount is owned by municipalities which allow access to non-local residents in various ways.

These municipal beaches and parks represent opportunities to connect more citizens to Long Island Sound, and would help take pressure off of State Parks to accommodate all of the people each year who wish to have access to the waterfront. Hammonasset alone accommodated almost 3 million visitors in 2020, and yet there were several days where Hammonasset and other shoreline State Parks had to turn visitors away due to capacity closures.

In 2020, there was considerable confusion amongst potential visitors when capacity closures occurred. Where could individuals and families go when they had travelled from miles around and then were turned away at Park gates?

This question of ensuring public access takes on extra urgency given the increased likelihood of future damage to shoreline facilities due to anticipated sea level rise, more intense coastal storms, and other potential public health challenges fueled by a changing climate. If Hammonasset were closed or damaged, what would we do?

This study would help provide a baseline of understanding for how municipal beaches and State Park beaches could work together to meet the broad public interest in connecting to Long Island Sound under a variety of future circumstances, and we hope you will be supportive of this effort.

Thank you for raising this bill, and the opportunity to testify.