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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
S.B. 980: AN ACT AUTHORIZING AND ADJUSTING BONDS OF THE STATE.	Support

Co-Chairs Fonfara and Horn, Ranking Members Cheeseman and Martin, Vice Chairs Miller, Moore, and Farrar, and honorable members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee,

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first nonprofit conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 128 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various state park and forest, trail recreation, sustainable forestry, and land conservation issues.

On behalf of CFPA, I am testifying in support of SB 980, specifically the proposed bond authorizations in the budget for CT DEEP that support recreational trails and greenways (\$5 million/year), open space conservation (\$10 million/year), and state park infrastructure (\$20 million/year) – all essential elements needed to meet the public’s high demand for outdoor recreation.

Outdoor recreation brings economic activity and other benefits to communities

In 2021, outdoor recreation in Connecticut contributed \$3.9 billion to our GDP and supported over 44,000 Connecticut jobs ([U.S Dept of Commerce: ORSA](#)). Much of this outdoor recreation was associated with using trails that stretch across state, municipal, and private lands, and its economic impact is growing. Economic activity from bicycling grew by almost 40% between 2019 – 2021; and during this same period, economic activity from hiking, camping, and climbing grew by over 50%.

According to the Connecticut Trail Census at UConn, recreational trails provide many benefits to communities (following are links to helpful summaries of trail benefits prepared by the CT Trail Census):

- [Trails promote health](#)
- [Trails support economies](#)
- [Trails build communities](#)
- [Trails enhance resiliency](#)

Trails are important to attract and retain people in Connecticut communities

It’s not just trail advocates who believe trails are essential to attract and retain people in communities. The National Association of Realtors (NAR) and National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) both published recent reports that demonstrate trails are significant community assets of great interest to homebuyers.

- The NAR notes “The good news is that recent studies have confirmed living near trails and greenways will likely raise your property value an average of 3-5% and sometimes even as high as 15%.” ([link to full story](#))

- The NAHB states “The top 5 most wanted community features are walking/jogging trails, a typically suburban neighborhood, a park area, being near retail space, and a walkable community. Most buyers of every generation want these features, [and there’s] evidence that regardless of age, buyers will respond positively to their presence in a community.” ([link to full story](#))

There is significant ongoing need for trails-related investments

In Fall, 2021, DEEP issued a request for recreational trails proposals with only \$3 million available and received an unprecedented 65 applications requesting over \$22 million. The remaining \$3 million was granted to twenty worthy projects, but another \$7 million in highly ranked proposals were unable to be funded.

In Fall, 2022, DEEP issued a request for proposals with \$9 million in bonding available and received 97 applications from municipalities and others requesting over \$29 million for projects statewide (including over \$19 million in highly ranked proposals). We expect the ongoing need for investments in Connecticut’s outdoor recreation infrastructure to continue, and your support of additional bond authorization is critical to help meet the public demand for outdoor recreation on trails.

Trails are an important investment for the future

Trails are one of the best ways that bond funds can be invested. Recreational trails for hiking, running, biking, equestrian, and other uses attract and sustain families and businesses, create healthy communities, and foster a high quality of life. Trails should be an ongoing priority for bonding investments.

Open Space investments are needed to catch-up on Connecticut’s 21% open space goal

In 1997, the CT General Assembly adopted the statutory goal that “Twenty-one percent of the State’s land shall be held as open space land” ([C.G.S. Section 23-8\(b\)](#)), and the deadline for meeting that goal was set for 2023 in the state’s Green Plan. As part of that 21% acquisition goal, ten percent of Connecticut would be held as public lands such as State Parks and Forests, and eleven percent would be held as open space stewarded by land trusts, municipalities, and water companies. The General Assembly also established the state’s open space grants program as the major investor of state resources to conserve state and non-state lands, and the Natural Heritage, Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Review Board, where I serve as Co-Chair, to provide oversight.

So far, we have fallen short of the 21% goal because funding for acquiring open space has not kept pace. The 21% goal is for DEEP and its partners (land trusts, water companies, and municipalities) to protect 673,210 acres of public open space together. However, at the end of 2021, DEEP and its partners together had protected a combined 513,831 acres as public open space, or **76.33%** of the goal. At the end of 2020, for comparison, DEEP and its partners together had protected 511,909 acres as public space, or 76.04% of the goal.

If we continue at the current pace of adding only 0.29% of the goal each year (~1,900 acres/year), it will take more than 80 years for Connecticut to reach its statutory 21% goal.

Honestly, if we wish to reach Connecticut’s 21% open space goal in our lifetimes, we should double or triple the funding available to do the job. Tripling the bond authorization to \$30 million per year would be consistent with recommendations in reports from the Governor’s Council on Climate Change. This would allow us to meet the statutory goal in approximately 20 years, compared to more than 80 years at our current pace.

Investments in infrastructure keep facilities safe for State Park visitors

DEEP facilities require ongoing maintenance and periodically larger capital investments. There is a capital improvement backlog estimated (conservatively) at more than \$130 million, despite significant recent investments supplemented with federal ARPA funds this past year.

The following graphic shows the dramatic increase in visitation that Connecticut's state parks have recorded over time (likely reaching over 17 million visitors in both 2021 and 2022).

This increase in outdoor recreation provides significant economic, health, wildlife, and other benefits to our state. As noted earlier, outdoor recreation in Connecticut generated \$3.9 billion in revenue and sustained over 44,000 jobs in 2021.

There are approximately 1,000 buildings at 110 State Parks and Forests that accommodate visitors, some of which date back to the 1930's and earlier. For example, the historic Ellie Mitchell pavilion at Rocky Neck State Park in East Lyme is a beautiful native stone structure built in the 1930's with supporting wood pillars cut from trees harvested from each of the State Parks and Forests that existed at the time.

This unique structure has hosted special events and generated revenues for the state, private vendors and the local community in many ways over the last 90 years. However, the structure is showing its age and DEEP estimates that the full cost to rehabilitate this structure alone is approximately \$30 million. Fortunately, this historic pavilion is getting attention, investment, and long-needed renovations thanks to bonding supplemented by ARPA funds this current fiscal year.

Overall, DEEP has identified a backlog of over \$130 million in critical maintenance, repairs, and other infrastructure improvement projects at State Parks. Some investments are necessary to renovate historic structures, but significant investments are also required to ensure facilities are more accessible to all, especially to those with mobility challenges. The \$40 million investment over two years, as included in SB 980, will help DEEP continue to chip away and reduce this backlog.

I encourage Committee members to consider the need for capital investments in Connecticut's State Parks as you would think about the need to invest in your own home over time. It would be unthinkable to go for 90 years in your home without some upgrade in your heating and cooling systems, or without periodic roof or siding repairs, or without providing for wi-fi connectivity or other evolving technological needs, and much more. If you let your home fall into disrepair rather than periodically making improvements, its value would degrade. Now, think about your home being opened up to the public, and how you might take extra care to keep it in an appropriate condition for millions of visitors. In similar fashion, we ask you to support bonding in SB 980 for infrastructure improvements, both necessary and long overdue, that sustain the many values that State Parks provide to all of us.

Thank you for the important work you do, and for the opportunity to testify today on this bill.

