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**Testimony of Andy Bicking, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest and Park Association  
Regarding An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025  
February 23, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Osten, Chairwoman Walker, Ranking Member Berthel, Ranking Member Nuccio and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Andy Bicking, Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA).

CFPA is the first non-profit conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 129 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various State park and trail recreation, sustainable forestry, climate change and land conservation issues.

I am a newcomer to the state, but my family's roots run deep. My mother grew up in Fairfield County, and I had the privilege of visiting my grandmother there for many years, exploring the woodlot and granite boulders behind her home. I am guessing that many of you have your own memories of special places – perhaps a park, pond, beach, trail, stream or garden – that inspires you today. In my new role as Executive Director of CFPA, I am grateful to work with a team of professional staff, dedicated volunteers and caring supporters that is working to extend experiences like these to all residents of the state.

For generations, Connecticut's forests, parks and trails have been critical underpinnings of the quality of life for all state residents, contributing meaningfully to water quality, recreational opportunity, public health and our shared economic potential. These sites are increasingly popular. In 2021, more than 17 million people visited Connecticut's State Parks – a 50% increase over the previous year – making them the state's largest outdoor attraction and benefitting the tourism economy. Furthermore, conserving our forests, parks and agricultural lands for current and future generations is both a powerful and cost-effective strategy to mitigate the harmful effects of climate change in both rural, suburban and urban settings.

CFPA's 2024 Conservation Agenda provides a path forward to build on this strong tradition and further position the state as an outstanding place where we can all thrive and realize hopes for the future. A top priority of CFPA continues to be the success of the Passport to the Parks program. We feel that this program is the most sustainable path to the success of the state's parks. As you know the state park needs and pressures don't follow the state budget calendar and the passport program allows DEEP to manage the system based on the seasonal needs. I respectfully ask that you consider our top four priorities and the role they play in the state budget:

- **Keep the Passport to the Parks funding intact.** Passport to the Parks provides a reliable source of funding to keep Connecticut's parks and beaches open and accessible to the public. In fact, the program is responsible for approximately 80% of the parks budget. It has reduced the risk of park closures, decreased wait times to enter parks, and makes these sites more accessible and affordable to the state's residents.
- **Raise staffing at DEEP to adequate levels** to accommodate dramatic increases in public use of recreational facilities and natural resources. Commissioner Dykes and her team at DEEP are doing remarkable work with the resources on hand, yet staffing levels remain low compared to the volume and sophistication of the work that must be done. Legislative support for DEEP as well as DOAG is critical to cover the cost of staffing to continue basic services.
- **Continue state bonding investments for trails, open space and agricultural land protection.**
- **Support the Community Investment Act**, which provides a valuable source of dedicated funding to protect our open space and trails. Our trails, open spaces and agricultural lands provide many benefits, yet as of 2023, Connecticut and its partners had protected 76.89 percent of its 673, 210 acre goal. Additional support for these programs is necessary to achieve the goal in a manner that engages the state, municipalities and local organizations advancing this work within their service areas.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this comment. I look forward to getting to know you all and working with you in the months ahead.