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## **Testimony of Andy Bicking, Executive Director Connecticut Forest & Park Association**

### **Presented to the Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee Regarding The Governor's 2026-7 Biennial Budget Proposal (HB 6864)**

**February 26, 2025**

Good afternoon, Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice Chairs Hartley, Kushner, Exum and Paris, Ranking Members Somers and Nuccio, and members of the Committee. My name is Andy Bicking, Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA).

Connecticut's forests, parks and trails are critical underpinnings of the quality of life for all State residents, contributing meaningfully to water quality, recreational opportunity, environmental resiliency, public health and our shared economic potential. CFPA has put forward recommendations to the General Assembly every year since 1897. Thank you for the opportunity to testify to you today. This year, we encourage the legislature's support of public access to state land, bonding support for trails and park infrastructure, and agency staff to implement the work.

#### **Passport to the Parks**

Thank you for updating the Passport to the Parks program's revenue structure in the 2024 budget adjustment. The Governor's biennial budget proposal affirms this work and provides a sustainable path forward for the State Parks system. Please support the Governor's proposal.

CFPA believes that diversions of the program and creating exceptions for multi-car households and specific demographics would undermine the program. Keeping Passport to the Parks intact ensures that State residents can enjoy access to their environmental and recreational heritage with no entrance fee, while providing lifeguard coverage, improved facilities, longer park hours and more programs.

Before Passport, State Parks were in a challenged state and more expensive. A single day-use pass to Hammonasset State Park used to cost \$13, and a season's pass \$67. Now, the modest vehicle registration fee that supports the program pays for itself after 2 trips to this popular destination.

CFPA has heard that visitors sometimes encounter full parking lots at some parks. We encourage the legislature to work with the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) to understand and improve programs such as ParkConnectCT that are trying to address this issue.

#### **Trails Bonding**

While the Governor's proposed Bond Package (SB 1247) is not the primary topic of this hearing, CFPA notes that Trails Bonding supports Connecticut's most popular land-based recreational activity, hiking and walking. The Governor proposes \$70 million for parks, forests and trails for the biennium. In prior

years, the General Assembly raised a bill to support trails bonding beyond the Governor's proposal and referred it to the Finance Committee. CFPA would appreciate your support for this again in 2025.

Investment in the Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails leverages significant volunteer labor, more than 18,000 hours from CFPA in 2024, valued at more than \$622,000. Every \$528 invested in the system, on average, maintains \$1 mile of trail (about \$1/10 feet). In addition, bond investments that connect community centers to the Blue-Blazed Trails through paved trails and greenways create meaningful access.

A \$70 million investment over the biennium is the minimum that is needed to maintain current services and respond to the estimated \$30 million of damage caused by severe weather and wildfire events in 2024. Five footbridges on Blue-Blazed Trails in the Southwest corner were wiped out in the devastating storms of August. Four have been repaired; one major project remains in 2025. CFPA is working with DEEP to restore access and build back better so these investments can withstand future storms. The agency has many more infrastructure projects throughout the state in need of repair and upgrades.

In addition to bonding for trails, parks and forests, CFPA encourages support of the State's open space and agricultural goals. The land conservation community has called for \$10 million in annual bonding for the Open Space Watershed Acquisition program. After accounting for committed/not yet closed funds and 2024/25 grants, the available balance in OSWA will not be enough to fund the next two grant rounds. CFPA also supports DEEP's request for \$6 million in Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust/State open space bonds. We also join with the Working Land Alliance to support HB 6798, an Act authorizing bond funds for farmers who suffer losses due to climate change-related events.

### **Agency Staffing & Facilities**

CFPA encourages support for the following budget enhancements and restorations related to DEEP staff and facilities:

- The Governor has proposed hiring new DEEP officers to keep our public lands safe and uphold environmental laws.
- DEEP's Land Acquisition and Management (LAM) Office is significantly understaffed, creating processing delays – two new surveyors, a new land records manager and two new grant administrators would address processing delays and help achieve the goal of protecting 21% of Connecticut's open space.
- The State's fish hatcheries are proposed for a reduction.

Thank you for your historic support of Connecticut's environment and consideration of the remarkable trail, park and forest resources that distinguish the state as unique among its peers. On behalf of CFPA, I very much appreciate the opportunity to provide this comment.