

Secretary Melissa McCaw  
Office of Policy and Management  
450 Capitol Avenue  
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Dear Secretary McCaw,

I write to you on behalf of my organization, the Friends of Connecticut State Parks, to ask your assistance in a matter critical to the future sustainability of the CT State Parks and Forests System, the necessity to increase the inadequate hourly rates of the System's seasonal workers.

The Friends' assessment of longstanding pay scale deficiencies is in direct alignment with the conclusions of the recently released CREATES Report and we strongly agree with its warning about the consequences to Parks' 11 million visitors from a continuance of unrealistic compensation levels. "If DEEP cannot adjust hourly pay in order to attract qualified staff, it may have to close parks or services at a time when attendance is increasing. The inability to adjust pay for experienced seasonal workers is an example of how inflexibility in the State's workforce management can impact the services it provides to residents."

Currently, the hourly rate range for seasonal State Park maintainers is between \$12-\$14/hr. With the next slated minimum wage increase, that range will become \$13-\$14 - a dollar's difference between the new unskilled young person accepting his/her first job and a worker returning after multiple recreation seasons who is highly trained and in need of only minimal oversight. In all likelihood, that undercompensated veteran seasonal worker is charged with instruction of the novice employee, a dispiriting situation which prompts the most talented to seek other employment opportunities. It is these skilled young workers with backgrounds in the trades and environmental studies that the Park System most needs in the pipeline to nurture and advance if a sound future for Parks is to be assured. In past decades, competition for coveted park jobs was robust and this skill set a given. The long decline in seasonal wages relative to the private sector has changed that landscape dramatically to the detriment of the Park System.

With the institution by the Legislature of the Passport to Parks Program in 2018, the Park System at last gained the financial means to increase wages and to add personnel within the limits of its available budgetary funds. Inexplicably, however, the State Parks Division has been denied permission to set wages for its temporary workers. Consequently, the Division's ability to reinforce a rational path of advancement for workers is minimal. The best seasonal candidates no longer become permanent maintainers and the most well rounded maintainers in turn do not become Park Supervisors because they have long ago exited State service.

The present lack of Park Division autonomy with respect to personnel decisions undercuts the explicit promise of the Passport when it was ratified by the

Legislature. The Legislative intent was for Parks' self-determination and the capacity for growth including development of revenue enhancing enterprise programs. Under contemporary conditions, proper provision of baseline services to the public is not even possible, let alone a desired expansion of recreational opportunities.

Instead of growing or even rebuilding to the staff levels of thirty to forty years ago, when visitors numbered half of those today, the State Parks System finds itself illogically shrinking as visitation skyrockets. In 1988, permanent staff numbered 185, today there are 74 fulltime people in the field. The System is in its weakest possible position in face of a possible 45% loss of staff to retirement next year.

Parks need sufficient numbers of seasonals now to bridge this sure to be devastating transition period. They are required in the moment to service and protect patrons this recreational season and as a pool from which to draw the best candidates to refill the critical positions of departing maintainers. They will likely be the Park Supervisors of the future.

Retention of these key workers hinges on realistic pay scales and the freedom for the Parks Division to reward those who have performed well and consistently over a number of years. The Friends, who have closely observed Park operations over decades, ask that you address this issue, raise hourly rates, and thus allow for paths to advancement and rewarding careers for young people interested in "people" management and environmental stewardship.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [eileencgrant@gmail.com](mailto:eileencgrant@gmail.com) or 203-245-4224.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Eileen Grant, Co-President Friends of CT State Parks

CC:

Senator Cathy Osten

Representative Toni Walker

Senator Craig Miner

Representative Mike France

CT DEEP Commissioner Katie Dykes

CT DEEP Chief of Staff Andrew Hoskins