

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony House Bill No. 5205
Veterans' and Military Affairs Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
February 7, 2023

Co-Chairs Marx and Nolan, Vice-Chairs Delany and Maroney, Ranking Members Gordon and Vail, and Members of the Veterans' and Military Affairs Committee:

The Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) is the state's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, including its ~130 land trusts. We advocate for land conservation, stewardship and funding, and work to ensure the long-term strength and viability of Connecticut's land conservation community.

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony in opposition to **House Bill No. 5205, An Act Concerning Veterans And The Passport To The Parks Motor Vehicle Registration Fee.**

Enacted in late 2017, the Passport to the Parks Program (Passport Program) generates dedicated revenues to support the operation and maintenance of Connecticut State Parks, Forests, and Wildlife Management Areas (collectively "State Parks"). Supported through an annual \$5 fee that is applied through the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles to registration of non-commercial vehicles, the Passport Program provides Connecticut residents access to all State Parks for free, while helping to restore and support park services such as campgrounds, lifeguards and hours of operation at certain parks and nature centers.

One of the state's top tourism destinations, Connecticut State Parks are worth the investment -- generating \$3.9 billion in revenue and helping to sustain 44,065 jobs in 2021. (National Bureau of Economic Analysis - 2021 Report) In each of the three years since the Passport Program was established, State Park visitation increased at least 10% annually. In 2021 State Park attendance was reported to be over 17 million visitors.

Beyond these economic benefits to the state and local communities, State Parks enhance quality of life for Connecticut residents, providing free opportunities for recreation and access to nature – and the physical and mental health benefits that access provides. These public lands also protect wildlife habitat, enhance water and air quality, and help to mitigate the impacts of a changing climate.

Allowing this exemption will not only result in the loss of dedicated annual support for the parks system, but may lead to a "slippery slope" of similar requests from other categories of users.

The Passport Program is working as intended. While very sensitive to the nature of the request and with no disrespect to the honor and service of military veterans, we respectfully urge the Committee to leave the fee structure for this dedicated source of revenue intact.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments, and for all you do. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

