



STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
DEPARTMENT of NATURAL and CULTURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION of PARKS and RECREATION
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January 22, 2024

The Honorable James Gray
and the Finance Committee
State House Room 103
Concord, NH 03301

RE: SB 345-FN relative to state park fees for state residents

Dear Chair Gray and Members of the Committee,

Please accept this testimony on behalf of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, Division of Parks and Recreation ("Division") regarding SB 345-FN relative to state park fees for state residents. The Division believes that this bill would have a substantial adverse impact on the visitor experience at the point of entrance to our state parks.

The Division has been working on a calibration of fee schedules across the Parks system in consultation with the Fiscal Committee. This has been a multi-year project dating back to 2018 and involving our State Parks Advisory Council. The first set of fee packages was approved by the Fiscal Committee on Sept 14, 2023 (FIS 23-278) and set the rates for Cannon Lift Tickets. The second was approved on April 21, 2023 (FIS 23-139) for the parking meter rates at the seacoast. Most recently, the Committee approved the rates for camping and lodging on Dec 15, 2023 (FIS 23-363). This bill has the potential to financially disrupt the careful planning and budgeting done by both the Division and the Fiscal Committee to ensure that fees are balanced and provide the necessary funding to operate the Parks system.

Regarding the visitor experience, in FY2023, nearly one million visitors entered New Hampshire state park day-use areas. If New Hampshire state park attendants were to begin requiring proof of residency from the nearly one million visitors at the gate, substantial traffic backups would most certainly occur resulting in public safety concerns, a loss of visitors due to traffic delays and undue timing hardships, as well as potential altercations with staff during residency verifications, a staff who are commonly comprised of high school aged youth.

An online reservation system was put into place in the fall of 2019 to specifically address state park capacity concerns and has been well received by visitors across the park system. Prior to 2019, parks were routinely full, with many visitors being turned away. The reservation system allows visitors the benefit of reserving ahead of time to guarantee their spot at a park while allowing the Division to define a specific capacity number for each park. As well, the established reservation system has streamlined the guest experience and flow of traffic. Confirmation emails are sent with each reservation that include a "know before you go" section with pertinent safety and rule information. The Division feels that we have made significant strides forward using the reservation system regarding visitor satisfaction, public safety, and managing park resources.

New Hampshire's hospitality and tourism-based private businesses do not differentiate fee structures based on residency as a common practice. Approximately half of the day-use visitors

to New Hampshire State Parks come from out-of-state and a residency-based price structure would likely discourage tourism and related economic activity.

By way of background, the State Park Fund was established in 1991, creating an operationally self-funded parks system. The House Appropriations Committee report that recommended passage wrote: *"This bill establishes the New Hampshire state park and ski areas as an enterprise-type self-funded, accountable business entity to provide improved park and ski recreation facilities and services to New Hampshire citizens and tourists alike."*

The fee approval process through the Joint Legislative Fiscal Committee pursuant to RSA 216-A:3-g, was established *"...to provide the department with the ability to maximize revenues and to adjust fees according to market conditions and trends as is the common practice in private industry."* RSA 216-A:3-g, II states: *"Fees for the use of campgrounds and ski lifts shall be comparable with the fees for use of similar privately owned facilities. The operation of all enterprise functions....shall be as profitable as possible, within the purposes of the park system."*

Further, as introduced, SB 345-FN's analysis statement would allow *"the commissioner to set separate fee schedules for residents and nonresidents for specific uses within any state park."* The Commissioner of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources already has this authority under RSA 216-A:3-g and the Division continually strives to balance its priorities by examining fee structures, visitation data, and other metrics to inform recommendations for adjustments to fees. In furtherance of your review of this bill, please weigh the impact on visitors with the consistency of this legislation across existing statutes in support of the efficiencies of New Hampshire's self-funding model for the state park system.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and additional information on SB 345. Please consider these impacts to the visitor experience. Let me know if I can provide any additional information.

Sincerely,



Brian J. Wilson
Director

C: Sarah L. Stewart, Commissioner, Department of Natural and Cultural Resources