

State Park System Advisory Council (RSA 216-A:3-kk)  
September 16, 2021 Meeting Minutes (*DRAFT*)

A regular meeting of the State Park System Advisory Council (SPAC) held at the Wentworth Coolidge Mansion (WCM) in Portsmouth. Chairman Gilbert called the meeting to order at 10:10 a.m. with a quorum present and introductions made.

In attendance were Chair Jeff Gilbert for Business; Michael Bruss for Historic Preservation; Dir Phil Bryce/DNCR designee; Rep Robert Harb/House; Matt Leahy/SPNHF; John Nyhan/Hampton Area Chamber; Rep Andrew Renzullo/RR&D Chair; and Rep Suzanne Smith/RR&D. Absent were Rick Blanchette for Recreation; Tom Chrisenton for Forestry; Buddy Dionne for Motorized Recreation; Ruth Griffin for Public; Jennifer Kennedy/Blue Ocean Society and Sen Tom Sherman/Senate. Torene Tango-Low served as clerk.

Also present were DNCR Commr Sarah Stewart; DHR Director Ben Wilson; BHS Andrew Cushing; WCM manager Charlotte “Sandy” Phelps; Park Ops Supv Mike Housman and Parks staff.

Ms Phelps gave a brief history of the Wentworth Coolidge Mansion and the historical items on display in the Council Room where the meeting was being held.

Minutes: Mr Nyhan MOVED to accept the minutes of June 11, 2021; Rep Renzullo SECONDED. The minutes were APPROVED as written.

Advise the Director: *Director’s Report*. Dir Bryce encouraged the Council members to provide him with comments on the Report. Mr Housman reported on the summer season operations. Mr Nyhan expressed appreciation for Parks’ support of the summer events held at Hampton Beach, including the Seafood Festival, Water Safety Day and the season-end Appreciation Party scheduled for tonight at MainSail Motel.

*Roundtable Discussion*. Rep Renzullo and Dir Bryce discussed the posting procedures of the DES beach advisory program. Rep Harb said that the Committee to study building a pier over the jetty at Hampton Beach state park for disability access will meet tomorrow. Historical information on the jetty will be sent to Rep Harb.

*Parks Budget & Capital Projects*. Dir Bryce reported on the Parks FY2021 financials, operating and capital budget and ARPA projects. The State Park Fund ended with a \$7M balance and the Ski Account has a \$1M balance for FY2021. A portion of the balance will be applied toward park maintenance, improvements and equipment needs, with a set aside to cover operational uncertainties. For example, day use and camping areas experience a 20% revenue loss on a rainy day. He thanked Mike Housman and park staff for controlling expenses. He credited the staff and park partners for managing through the pandemic and providing the public with a good visitor experience. The increase in online donations, purchase of state park plates and season passes show public support of the park system. Members discussed the challenges of the extended season and staffing needs. Mr Nyhan said the Chamber is spearheading workforce recruitment and training programs.

*Park Fees and Fines*. Dir Bryce thanked Mr Nyhan for chairing the SPAC Fees Subcommittee and their recommendations for changes to park fees. Given the Park Fund balance, Dir Bryce will request Fiscal Committee approval of a focused Fee Package: a) an increase to the seacoast metered parking fees, b) an increase to RV campsite fees and c) a parking fee at Franconia Notch. Other fee recommendations, including a non-resident fee, will be presented in Phase 2 of the Fee Package.

*Connecticut Lakes Region sign*. Members discussed the suggestion from Rep Dennis Thompson to install a “Welcome to the Connecticut Lakes Region” highway sign along the northbound lane of the

Franconia Notch State Park parkway on I-93. The suggestion is to promote the region and support economic activity and businesses there. Installing such a sign would impact the character and cultural landscape of Franconia Notch parkway. Other ideas included installing the sign near a northern area Visitor Center, a “see what’s next” series of roadside signage; and a QR code that brings the user to a Connecticut Lakes Region website.

*Parks website.* Parks’ Public Information and Marketing Officer Brent Wucher said users of the Parks website and social media has increased by 81% since 2019, with over 600 webpages within the website and 66% of users accessing the website using their mobile device. Mr Wucher is working with SilverTech to update the website, including upgrading the content management system, conducting community forums, an analytical review, and improved search optimization and visual design. The plan is for a spring rollout.

Capital & Parks Improvements. Mr Mansfield will discuss the seacoast capital budget and ARPA projects, as well as the use of the Rye Harbor cottage during the site visits to Fort Stark and Rye Harbor.

Advocate for Parks. Members discussed the Dept of Administrative Services SWCAP (Statewide Central Services Costs) that is charged against the State Park Fund. SWCAP charges include the administrative costs for department-wide, shared resources, such as DD&M (Design, Development & Maintenance), the Business Office and the Warehouse. Discussion included whether the amount charged is appropriate for a self-funded organization and whether legislature would be willing to take up the issue in support of Parks. Members also discussed how the State handles the pay rates of park employees, especially in this highly competitive labor market. Mr Housman said that he is working with H.R. on the Park Managers Series of positions and pay. H.R. was supportive of the pay increases for lifeguards.

Rep Renzullo and Rep Smith spoke about the LSRs they have filed, including OHRV use on class V and VI roads, OHRV speed regulators, and a study commission on OHRV use. They reported that the study committee on rail trail management practices and the study committee on the on road usage of non-traditional motor vehicles are continuing their work.

Review of Agreements. Dir Bryce is working on a counter proposal for the lease of the North Woodstock Visitor Center to the White Mountains Attractions Association. He would like to meet with the SPAC Leasing Subcommittee to discuss this and several other current agreements, including contract with the Seacoast Science Center who is fundraising to expand the Science Center building at Odiorne.

Friends Groups. Volunteer Manager Jesse Creedy-Powers reported that there are 34 active volunteer agreements, that communications with park friends groups and volunteers have improved, onsite signage recognizing park volunteers have been installed within the park system, and that Parks provides insurance coverage for several volunteer groups. She will hold annual meetings to recognize the work of the park volunteers and partners.

AOB. In response to Mr Nyhan inquiry, Dir Bryce said that the annual SPAC report due on Nov. 1, is currently with the department’s Business Office.

Rep Renzullo MOTIONED to adjourn, SECONDED by Rep Smith. The meeting adjourned at 11:50 a.m. Lunch was provided and a tour of Fort Stark and Rye Harbor immediately followed.

*Submitted by T. Tango-Lowy*