

Cuts imperil parks, groups warn

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Reduced state funds could limit lifeguards, force some closures

In the same year they will be celebrating their 100th anniversary, Connecticut's 107 state parks and 32 state forests are in trouble.

So say two advocacy groups that are mounting a campaign to bring attention to the needs of the parks and forests, now facing state budget cuts they fear would mean reductions to staff already at historically low levels, lifeguards at beaches only two or three days a week in the summer and even closure of some parks.

"We all want to celebrate the 100th anniversary of state parks, but at the same time, the infrastructure that maintains state parks is really starting to crumble," said Eric Hammerling, executive director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association.

In advance of its annual Friends of Connecticut State Parks Day at the legislature later this month, the association and the Friends of Connecticut State Parks are recruiting state lawmakers to "adopt a park" in their district and learn about its assets and needs, help with events such as walks and clean-ups, and advocate for the state park budget.

In a letter sent to legislators this week, the two groups note that more than 8 million people annually visit state parks, and, according to a 2011 University of Connecticut study, parks attract \$1 billion annually and support more than 9,000 jobs.

"Parks hardly cost anything, and they're such an economic engine," said Eileen Grant, president of the Friends of Connecticut State Parks.

State parks and forests in southeastern Connecticut, including Rocky Neck in East Lyme, Gillette Castle in East Haddam, Bluff Point in Groton, Pachaug State Forest in Voluntown and Harkness Memorial in Waterford, are some of the most popular in the state and could be among those affected, she noted.

The letter also notes that the parks have only 74 full-time staff, and 15 of these are eligible for retirement in July and may not be replaced if budget cuts are too deep. The current level is one-third of what it was 40 years ago, when the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection had less than half of its present acreage and fewer visitors, the letter states.

They are also concerned that the 500-member seasonal workforce, which includes lifeguards, fee collectors at entrance gates and staff to clean bathrooms and cut grass, could be cut to 375 unless parks receive more funds, Grant said.

Dennis Schain, spokesman for DEEP, said the agency is assessing Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's budget proposal. He said no decisions have been made about what services or personnel would be cut, and that DEEP would look to minimize any reductions that would curtail use by the public.

Hammerling said the two groups are advocating for \$3.5 million over the current year's budget of about the \$12.2. The increase would pay for increasing permanent staff to 100; adding four environmental conservation officers; and for maintenance and upgrades at parks.

"We think the parks budget has been underfunded for years, and we hope that in the 100th anniversary year, the governor can make a statement that parks are worth protecting," he said.

Pamela Adams, the retired director of state parks who is chairwoman of the centennial celebration committee, said events will begin in August and run through August 2014, marking the acquisition of first park land, at Sherwood Island in Westbrook, in 1913, and the park's opening a year later. Throughout the year, there will be 100th anniversary events put on by Friends groups statewide. The Friends of Harkness, for example, is planning a Great Gatsby event.

Thus far three legislators have agreed to adopt parks in response to the "Adopt A Park" letter: Rep. Mae Flexer, D-Killingly; Rep. Joe Crisco, D-Woodbridge, and Rep. Timothy Bowles, D-Ledyard, who adopted Stoddard Hill State Park.

"My concern is that we're not being good stewards of our parks, and the irony is that this is happening in the 100th anniversary," Bowles said. "I'll be taking a hard look at what we might be able to do to minimize the damage."

Bowles is a member of the legislature's Environment Committee, as is state Rep. Edward Moukawsher, D-Groton.

"There are two significant state parks in Groton I'd be more than happy to adopt," Moukawsher said, referring to Bluff Point and Fort Griswold.

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