

Improving Our Parklands-- a Democratic Tradition

By John Broderick

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In 2006, Massachusetts was ranked 48th out of 50 states in per capita spending on parks and recreation. After adjusting for inflation there has been a 33% decline in the urban parks budget since 2001, and the Department of Conservation and Recreation has been forced to cut 20% of its staff in the last five years. Funding and performance go hand-in-hand, and due to fiscal constraints, state parks have suffered serious problems concerning the upkeep of what is becoming a decrepit infrastructure.

Our state parks serve as the wellsprings of a healthy, active community and are a physical embodiment of democratic ideals. Newton residents' lives are enriched by the recreational and aesthetic benefits offered by Hemlock Gorge, Hammond Pond, the Upper Charles, and the Chestnut Hill Reservoir. Parks offer many environmental benefits, including encouraging biodiversity and mitigating the effects of pollution and climate change. Parks also help protect water quality, particularly by reducing stormwater runoff and limiting the quantity of harmful fertilizers that run into streams from suburban lawns. Massachusetts has long been at the vanguard of land protection and conservation, and state government has a duty to protect and improve green spaces throughout the Commonwealth.

In 2003 Governor Romney decided to merge two existing agencies to create the DCR, thereby consolidating Massachusetts' state park administration under one umbrella. Unfortunately, since then, there has been a steady trend of reduced funding. Advocacy groups have attempted to bridge fiscal gaps and have played an important role in publicizing the need for increased park funding and environmental stewardship, but these efforts, while commendable, cannot stand alone: without an active citizenry and government support, the efforts of advocacy groups can only serve as stop-gaps. As in any democratic process, active citizen participation is crucial. One important resource available to citizens who want to protect and improve our state parks is the DCR Stewardship Council.

The Stewardship Council is a 13-member citizen advisory council appointed by the Governor to oversee the DCR and work with the agency to provide well-maintained and well-managed parks. It is composed of environmental advocates, business leaders, and academics working to provide accountability in agency oversight and to set up long term goals in the fields of resource management planning, capital planning, and policy development. They work as impartial advisors. Recognizing that the current DCR budget is "bare-boned" the Council has acknowledged the need for better planning and more fiscal discipline. It examines budget allocations, and has applauded some decisions, such as the allotment of 1.5 million dollars for stormwater management remediation, while criticizing other decisions, such as the idea of giving the Urban Parks and Recreation the responsibility of maintaining 166 new acres (the

Central Artery/Tunnel Parks and Spectacle Island) with no increase in budgeting. The latter decision was revised by the DCR due in part to the council's criticisms.

The DCR Stewardship Council is truly democratic. All of the meetings are attended by DCR Commissioner Priscilla Geigis and are open to the public, giving an invaluable forum for citizens and advocacy groups to voice their opinions directly to the government administrators on policy issues that shape our parks. Public comments are welcomed and recorded.

In addition to participating in the Stewardship Council, there are many opportunities for citizens to become active stewards for our parks, by volunteering with local advocacy groups, including the Charles River Conservancy, which has a large Volunteer corps. CRC volunteers have been improving the riverbanks through shoreline restoration, invasive species removal, and overall park maintenance. Charles River Watershed Association volunteers are working to improve water quality in the watershed. The Friends of the Hemlock Gorge and the Conservation and Recreation Campaign are other groups that welcome volunteers. All of us should let our local officials know that we feel that parks are important and should be adequately funded. It is up to us as citizens to take part - to "check back in", as Governor Deval Patrick says - in the great democratic process of taking responsibility for our parks and finding viable solutions to their problems.

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