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Massachusetts Conservation  
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*Judy Lehrer Jacobs  
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## **Our vital, historic state parks need champions. Join us and be one.**

An open letter to elected and appointed officials and park friends:

Massachusetts state parks are in crisis. More than a decade of funding and staffing cuts have eviscerated the Department of Conservation and Recreation's (DCR) ability to meet its mission "to protect, promote and enhance our common wealth of natural, cultural and recreational resources for the well-being of all," while digging a \$1.0 billion deferred maintenance hole. The December 2021 [Legislative Special Commission report on DCR \(p.51\)](#) found that Massachusetts, one of the wealthiest states in the nation, nevertheless ranks last in per capita spending on state and municipal parks.

State park visitors rarely encounter rangers, and too often find shuttered facilities, crumbling infrastructure, and dirty bathrooms. Park rules enforcement to ensure visitor safety and resource protection is virtually non-existent. Also compromised is our parkland's ability to support our physical and mental well-being, promote environmental justice, mitigate flooding and urban heat islands, foster climate resilience, and harbor significant natural resources and biodiversity.

The FY2023 state budget process and the recently passed economic development bill, which will spend nearly \$220 million on state and local parks and other natural resource investments, are significant steps in the right direction. We urge the incoming Healey-Driscoll Administration and Legislature to continue investing in our state parks as a central component of the Commonwealth's open space resources. The following are four recommendations critical to rebuilding a state park system that meets our collective, essential needs:

1. **Appoint a DCR Commissioner with expertise, vision, and leadership skills.** Appointing six commissioners in the last eight years is a recipe for failure. The new administration must hire an experienced, committed commissioner with a record of successful park operations and land management. The [DCR Stewardship Council](#) and the public should have input in the hiring process.

2. **Ensure DCR implements the [Legislative Special Commission's](#) recommendations (p.10).** Elected and appointed officials must fund DCR operations and staffing increases the Commission outlined. Equally important is funding a first-ever DCR strategic plan. The [Strategic Readiness Initiative](#) the agency has begun is a start, but cannot replace a full strategic planning exercise.
3. **Continue to increase DCR's operations budget by at least \$10 million annually for at least another decade.** With a \$10 million increase in its operating budget for FY23, the agency has converted some seasonal positions to FTEs and pledged to begin backfilling at least 50 of the 300 positions lost to a decade of cuts. But DCR staffing remains inadequate to protect and steward natural and cultural assets, advance park planning, and provide project management and engineering support for restoring and improving park infrastructure.
4. **Eliminate the \$1.0 billion deferred maintenance backlog plaguing our parks and forests** using federal American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA), state budget surplus, state capital budget, and develop new, creative, dedicated park funding. At a minimum, this will take \$250 million in capital spending each year for a decade. Adequate, consistent funding will help restore DCR facilities and provide for a robust ongoing capital program as we focus on equity, climate change impacts, sustainability, and other park needs.

**Background:** In the Spring of 2020, as businesses, institutions, and other places of social interaction shut down because of the pandemic, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts made the correct decision to allow DCR forests, parks, and beaches to remain open and free to visit, knowing people would need outdoor places where they could safely escape COVID restrictions. The tremendous increase in park visits did not wane when pandemic conditions eased. People realized, many for the first time, that they had these publicly funded, historic gems in their midst and continue to flock to them in droves.

Concurrently, the Legislative Special Commission's detailed report on DCR's long standing fiscal dilemma and stepped-up park advocacy coincided perfectly with the FY2023 budget cycle, and lawmakers listened. Specifically, the Commonwealth funded a \$10.0 million parks and recreation operations budget increase (Line Item 2810-0100) and eliminated retained fee and lease revenue as a day-to-day source of operating funds, replacing anticipated but by no means guaranteed funding with general revenue tax dollars. So, for the first time in more than a decade, DCR planners did not have to guess the amount of operating funds they had available to them for the fiscal year.

These funding and policy changes, though meaningful, are not enough to dig the agency out of its 2008 recession-induced operational and capital hole. It will take at least a decade of adequate, sustained funding, and competent, committed, stable, visionary leadership from elected and appointed state officials to get our state parks to where they should be – a well-funded, reliable partner in support of park users and our state's \$16.0 billion annual outdoor economy.

**Conclusion:** Action on these four recommendations is critical to DCR's ability to fulfill its mission. The 2003 merger of the Department of Environmental Management and the Metropolitan District Commission to create DCR, and the creation of the DCR Stewardship Council to guide the new agency, has yet to live up to the stated goal to strengthen our historic park system, the living legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Eliot.

State government, park friends groups and conservation advocates across the state working in concert have laid the foundation for success via the FY2023 budget and the economic development bill. DCR parks, beaches, forests, and other facilities benefit our physical and mental health, outdoor economy, habitat protection efforts, climate change resiliency, accessibility, resource stewardship, and environmental justice goals. Moving forward, our parks need champions in the Legislature and the Healey-Driscoll Administration who will commit to building on our progress over the long haul.

**Now is the time to create a 21st Century park and open space system.**

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this further before and after the new legislative session and the new gubernatorial administration begins. We respectfully ask you to publicly commit to advancing these four recommendations. Our park ecosystem and the people who rely on it deserve nothing less.

Thank you very much for your time and attention to this vital matter. We look forward to working with you on this important initiative.

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