

To: Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice-Chairs Hartley, Exum, and Paris, Ranking Members Berthel and Nuccio, and Honorable Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Lynn Wilkinson, and I am the President of the Friends of Gillette Castle State Park in Hadlyme, CT. I'm submitting written testimony regarding the Governor's Budget proposal for FY 2024-25, and specifically, the recommendations that impact our State Parks.

The Friends of Gillette Castle support the Budget proposal and appreciate the addition of one critical staff-person to support State Parks, but we would like to suggest that this isn't nearly enough given the record attendance State Parks are experiencing, and the multiple challenges which are currently faced through insufficient full time staffing and an over-reliance on seasonal workers.

To speak specifically to our experience at the Gillette Castle unit, I have described below a sample of events in the last 12 months which are directly related to shortages in full time equivalent employees in this unit, and which have negatively impacted the work of the Friends of Gillette Castle State Park.

Significant issues due to an over-reliance on seasonal employees for key roles:

Delays in creating signage to mark the home of an important early Japanese immigrant, Yukitaka Osaki because the Castle archivist is a seasonal employee:

In October, 2021, the Friends of Gillette Castle embarked upon a project to create signage commemorating Yukitaka Osaki near his waterfront home on the grounds of Gillette Castle. Yukitaka was a Japanese immigrant who assisted William Gillette and became a highly trusted advisor and confidante. To create this sign, we needed high quality images of Osaki from the Gillette Castle Archives. However, since the only resource with skills and ability to access these archives was a seasonal employee, our efforts to access these images were delayed by nearly 4 months (the employee had "maxed his hours" and we had to await his re-hire for the following season.) We note that 18 months later, this sign is *still* not final, and that the delay is nearly entirely due to challenges in getting the sign through a DEEP review process in the absence of a Park Supervisor.

Significant delays in preserving and protecting the home of Yukitaka Osaki because there are only two year-round maintainers in the unit:

In November, 2021, the Friends of Gillette Castle purchased and installed a tarp to cover the roof of the Osaki home. Through rapid mobilization of the Friends and park staff, we stabilized and ventilated the structure, so that it could be stabilized while we worked with the state to evaluate whether this important historical artifact can be restored. Over the summer, we removed invasive vines from the structure and dead trees which threaten it were removed. In January, 2022, we discovered that the tarp had not weathered one of the many windstorms which have troubled us this winter. We rallied again to purchase a new tarp and work with the state to install it. We partnered with the state to remove the old tarp, which at the time had resources to assist, but the installation of the new tarp was repeatedly delayed due to weather concerns. We currently have weather which would enable installation, but since this

work was supported by seasonal staff, we are now delayed due to staffing shortages (we need at minimum four people for this task, one at each corner, and the seasonal staff have “timed out” and need to be re-hired).

Observations on the inefficiencies caused by over-reliance on seasonal workers:

Seasonal workers are the back-bone of the staffing structure in our state park system. At Gillette Castle, we have 3 full time equivalent staff (the Park Supervisor plus two maintainers), who are supplemented by 31 seasonal hires. The efforts of seasonal hires are to be commended and recognized, and the Friends of Gillette Castle can easily name many individuals who have had long-term seasonal relationships with the unit and make significant and highly valued contributions.

At the same time, each year many of these 31 seasonals are brand-new hires, with absolutely no experience in the role. The Friends of Gillette Castle have no visibility into the hiring processes, but we understand that the hiring process is not easy to navigate, in part due to extensive process to adhere to the expectations of a unionized workforce. For many of these seasonal hires, this is their first job ever. Even if the hiring process were simple and streamlined, the effort to recruit, train and oversee a significant number of new hires is a monumental effort that has to be repeated as a Sisyphean task every single year.

Observations on the challenges caused by lack of capacity in Full Time Equivalents

No capacity to stop-gap the Park Supervisor Position: In April, 2022, our Park Supervisor accepted a promotion and started work at the Harkness State Park unit. Jack informed us that there was no immediate replacement, but that he would do his best to watch out and help the Castle unit when he could. We girded ourselves for a long wait for his replacement, and watched to see what interim staffing structure might be established. My records indicate that as of September, 2022 Jack was *still* doing the work of two people – full time at his new job at Harkness and “watching out for the Castle unit when he could”. The situation had to be remedied by hiring an outside contractor; there was simply not enough staff to fill the gap (and even if there had been capacity, union rules disallow work “out of grade”).

No capacity to stop-gap the Special Use Permit position: We were informed in January this year that the individual who manages Special Use Permits had moved on to another role. Since there is no spare capacity in the department, a moratorium had been placed on all new Special Use Permits. The Friends of Gillette Castle had been very eagerly planning a spring storytelling event with the Hartford-based non-profit Speak Up which would have required a new special use permit. We had to delay this event to October.

Significant closures to Gillette Castle State Park operations due to unspecified inefficiencies which are likely related to staffing.

In July, 2019, the CT State Bonding Commission authorized \$1.99 million for the reconstruction of collapsed retaining walls, restoration of a deteriorated entrance portico,

and a terrace restoration. The first two phases of this three part project was scheduled and executed in 2020-2021, and the Friends of Gillette Castle commend the state for their willingness to commit significant funding for this project, and for the efficiency with which these major projects were put out to bid, contracted and then executed.

The final phase was restoration of the terrace which overlooks the Connecticut River. Since egress from the Castle is via the terrace, the Castle had to be closed for the duration of the construction. Since this has a significant impact to the public, a thoughtful plan that minimized the impact of the closure was devised – specifically, the construction was scheduled to start soon after Labor Day and end by Thanksgiving. This would mean that the Castle was closed during fall, but this was viewed (by the Park Supervisor and DEEP) as a reasonable trade-off so that the Castle could open for the highly popular holiday program. Accordingly, the Park Supervisor created a staffing plan in which all the seasonal guide employees were terminated on Labor Day.

In order for the construction to begin right after Labor Day, the contracting process should have been completed well before Labor Day itself. Alas, this did not happen, the contracts were not signed until mid September, and work did not start “in earnest” until early November. The end result was that the Castle was closed during fall leaf-peeping season, **and** also closed during the Holiday program.

There were no doubt myriad issues that led to this situation, but we suggest that staffing challenges were part of the problem – the fact that the park supervisor had started a full-time job elsewhere, as discussed above – meant that there was nobody with capacity to communicate regularly with the contracting team and ensure that all players were on the same page. Alternatively, even if the delays could not be prevented, an active park supervisor with capacity could potentially have reversed course earlier and found a way to keep the park open during leaf-peeping season.

Some general observations about state wide staffing levels within DEEP

The current statewide staffing level is the lowest it has been since 1930/1040, and yet visitors to state parks are hitting all-time highs (13 million visitors in 2022).

It is possible to create some telling interesting ratios using 83 FTEs:

One FTE per 157,000 visitors

One FTE per 3,000 acres of land

In 1982, the state had 204 FTEs and only handled 6 M visitors, which comes to one FTE per 29,000 visitors. **Today's FTE staff handle more than five times as many visitors per person as was true in 1982.**

The Value of our State Parks

To close, we are very grateful for the efforts of DEEP to maintain and care for our state parks, and we encourage a careful look at the overall staffing situation in our state parks. In East Haddam, our state parks are a major driver of the economy. State-wide, the outdoor recreation economy which in 2021 generated \$3.9 billion in direct revenues and supported over 44,000 private sector jobs.

Respectfully,

Lynn Wilkinson
President, The Friends of Gillette Castle State Park