

DCR Stewardship Council

FY 2024 Budget Priorities

Background

Monthly meetings, subcommittee discussions, DCR staff presentations, partner presentations, and public comments place the DCR Stewardship Council in a unique position to understand the importance of our state park system and identify programmatic and staffing needs. In addition, this year the Council held a listening session to specifically gather public comment on budget priorities. This iterative monthly process has provided the Council with an understanding of the needs and opportunities facing DCR. The Council will conduct an annual review with DCR to assess the implementation of these annual recommendations.

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated the importance of our state park system to public well-being. Park usage has reached historic levels. Additionally, parks serve as vital infrastructure to our outdoor economy and generate significant sale tax revenue.

In Massachusetts the numbers are striking: \$16.2 billion in consumer spending, 120,000 direct jobs, \$5.9 billion in wages and salaries, and \$911 million in state and local tax revenue. The outdoor recreation industry is a significant employer in the state. The Council urges legislators and policymakers to evaluate and consider the importance of DCR's facilities, lands, and programs to the public health, the Massachusetts outdoor economy and the Commonwealth's sales tax revenue.

DCR programs and lands are central to many of our society's most pressing needs, such as climate change, environmental justice, and public health. Our Park system represents an enormous asset to help us address these issues.

These recommendations focus on specifics initiatives for the agency. Beyond these specific recommendations there is a clear need for an increase in overall funding for the agency to rebuild administrative and programmatic capacity. After decades of underfunding, we need a continuing effort to provide the financial support to rebuild our parks. In FY 2023, the significant increase in funding from the legislature is hopefully a down payment to fully support our parks and open space in the future. Also, this year the elimination of retained revenue as a partial means of funding our state parks represents a significant policy victory.

Specifically, the Council has identified the following budget priorities, which are elaborated on in further detail in the subsequent section. The final section identifies a budgetary policy priority.

- Partnerships: Increase the agency's capacity to develop partnerships with nonprofit organizations, friends' groups, and local governments to support the agency's mission and park system.
- Visibility: The agency should make a significant investment for digital marketing, branding, and outreach for state parks and programs with clear performance metrics. These programs should increase transparency and public knowledge of DCR programs.
- Management: Fully staff and fund the program responsible for the development of Resource Management Plans.
- Implementation of Special Commission Report and Strategic Readiness Project: formalize and continue support of Special Commission Report and Strategic Readiness project.

Budget Priority Details

Partnerships: DCR cannot alone face its many challenges, and relies on third party partners to further leverage private investment in our parks. These partnerships are especially important given the critical need to increase capital investment in our parks to address the significant issue of deferred maintenance.

Accordingly, the Council recommends expanding DCR's capacity to develop partnerships with nonprofit organizations, friends' groups, and local governments to support the agency's mission and park system. DCR needs an aggressive partnership program that creative and flexible. There is also a need to improve, support and foster current partnerships.

Visibility: The historic levels of use of DCR properties over the last year clearly validates the Commonwealth's century-long investment in parks and open space. The public has relied on our parks and open space in a way that we may never have anticipated. DCR needs to take advantage of the dramatic increase in public use by developing aggressive digital marketing, branding, and outreach initiatives that will ensure that the public continues to use and appreciate the value of parks. This effort should focus on increasing transparency and making parks and forests more

accessible to the public. DCR should also increase equity of access and actively promote four season access in both urban and rural areas. These programs also need to develop innovative approaches for Gateway Cities and Environmental Justice communities.

Accordingly, the Council recommends expanding digital marketing, branding, and outreach to make our parks more open and accessible to the public.

Management: DCR needs to further invest in the management of our park and forests. Understanding what the agency owns, identifying needs, and establishing practical objectives is essential to moving forward.

Specifically, a robust Resource Management Plan program would provide a clear view and an important decision-making tool to identify management and capital needs. It would also perfectly complement DCR's successful Asset Management Modernization Program. When combined, these efforts will be essential in planning for adaptation and mitigation for all DCR properties as we face the challenges of climate change.

Accordingly, the Council recommends fully funding and staffing the development of Resource Management Plans.

Special Commission Report and Strategic Readiness Project: It is important that resources are provided to maintain a dedicated team to implement recommendations in both these reports. Without consistent support the changes needed and highlighted in these forums will lose momentum and not move forward. These initiatives which were funded by the legislature have developed a path forward to address the many challenges facing our parks and should be supported.

Accordingly, the Council recommends fully funding and staffing the implementation of the recommendation of Special Commission Report and the Strategic Readiness Project in FY 2024.