



Stewardship Council

DCR Stewardship Council FY 2025 Budget Priorities

Background

Monthly meetings, committee discussions (policy, finance and stakeholders), 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, each year the Council holds a listening session to specifically gather public comment on budget priorities. This year over forty individuals attended the session. 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.¹ 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 forest and park system represents an enormous asset to help us address these issues.

¹ Data from the Outdoor Industry Association.

General Recommendations

Our recommendations focus on specific 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. A reoccurring comment in the listening session was the need to increase staffing and invest in park infrastructure. This is no surprise given that the parks have a billion-dollar backlog in needed capital improvements. First impressions of park facilities are critical to public use. After decades of underfunding, we need a continuing effort to provide the financial support to rebuild our parks. Over the past several years, the legislature has made a significant increase in funding to park operations and this is hopefully a down payment to fully support our parks and open space in the future. The fact that Massachusetts is the last state in the country in per capita investment of our parks is a disgrace! In a progressive state that has a long history of environmental leadership, the neglect of our parks is a striking failure. While the Council applauds the recent forestry initiative of Secretary Tepper, we would urge a similar Secretariat level focus on the infrastructure of our parks.

Specific Programmatic Recommendations

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. As awareness of the remarkable resources of the park system increases, the Council believes that public and legislative support for necessary budget increases will naturally result.
- Management: Fully staff and fund the program responsible for the development of Resource Management Plans.

- Implementation of Special Commission Report and Strategic Readiness Initiative:
Formalize and continue support of Special Commission Report and Strategic Readiness Initiative.

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 is 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 several years 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. Although these recommendations do not deal with the capital budget, operational resources should be directed toward the development of a capital budget dashboard that will increase transparency for the public and legislature on the status of capital projects.

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 Initiative: It is important that resources are provided to maintain a dedicated team to implement recommendations in both of 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 Initiative in FY 2025, adjusted for any modifications brought forth in the Commissioner's own strategic planning process (with support from the Council).