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Stewardship Council Oversight Strategy



Stewardship Council

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Introduction

Established by the legislature in 2003, the Massachusetts Stewardship Council first met in September 2004. The Council is an independent body that assists and oversees the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). The Council has a number of specific responsibilities of which the most important are overseeing and approving all Resource Management Plans prepared by DCR and ensuring the efficacy of the agency's operating and capital budget to meet its considerable portfolio of responsibilities. The Resource Management Plans provide guidelines for the operation and land stewardship of all reservations, parks and forests under DCR's management and are important in prioritizing the level and deployment of operating and capital resources across the agency.

The Massachusetts Stewardship Oversight Strategy incorporates brief reports on the Council's activities over the previous two-year period, and it articulates the Council's priorities for the next two-year period. This document is divided into five sections: Policy; Operating and Capital Budgets; Climate; Park Management; and Communications & Accountability.

Policy

Over the past several years, the Stewardship Council has engaged less in policy formulation and more in periodic reviews of existing policy. Regularly, with the Commissioner and staff's assistance, we review the status of Article 97¹ activities affecting DCR's system. In addition we have reviewed progress on the agency's different "Agile Scrums", affecting mostly internal policies and procedures, the introduction of electric bicycles on DCR trails, reviewing the results of the Blue Hills deer hunt and potential policy and procedural changes, and others.

For purposes of this Oversight Strategy it is likely we will continue to engage in policy development on an opportunistic basis – as the need arises and in the event circumstances call for changes in the agency policy. Climate adaptation and hazard mitigation findings are likely to trigger such reviews.

Operating & Capital Budgets

Notwithstanding our previous Oversight commitment to helping increase Energy and Environmental Affairs budget levels closer to 1% of the overall state budget, that share remains at 0.54%, a ten-year low. And while our efforts to increase DCR's operating budget may appear to have had some success, increasing from \$79.8 million in FY14 to \$84.9 million in FY18, budgets have remained flat or declined when adjusted for inflation. Actual DCR operating *expenditures* illustrate the spending constraints to which DCR has been subject: \$1.8 million less was spent than the GAA budget amount in FY14; \$5.6 million less in FY15; \$5.1 million less in FY16; and \$5.5 million less in FY17. While DCR's capital bond cap

¹ Most Article 97 matters involve proposals to transfer DCR-owned properties to other entities, potentially for a use other than park or recreation land.

allocation increased through FY16 (\$140 million), it has since declined to \$115 million and \$125 million in FY17 and FY18, respectively. DCR analysis suggests that approximately one third of capital allocations are spent on deferred maintenance projects each year.

The Administration's H2 budget for FY19 included some meaningful increases to the State Parks and Recreation account and the Seasonal account while funding the State House Rangers closer to costs incurred by the agency. For the first time in several years, the appropriated amounts in DCR's budgets have increased as a share of the overall operating budget, reversing several years of appropriation declines as the legislature has forced the agency to rely on more of its funding from collected fees.

DCR's efforts to implement a new Asset Management Modernization system should ultimately provide ready and verifiable information on resources needed to improve the condition, programming and regular maintenance of parks and other facilities throughout the state. Implemented properly, this system should allow the agency to operate far more efficiently and transparently.

Over the period of this biennial Oversight Strategy the Stewardship Council intends to:

- i) Monitor and oversee the development and successful implementation of the Asset Management Modernization system throughout the agency, particularly to ensure it increases the agency's responsiveness and efficiency in responding to customer requests for maintenance improvements *and* to ensure the system feeds agency budget and planning activities in a clear and verifiable manner. We will continue to advocate for incremental operating funding to support the staffing, consulting and systems necessary to build, implement and maintain this essential capability.
- ii) Develop and implement strategies to achieve funding levels that would allow the agency to reduce its backlog of deferred maintenance and more regularly maintain and make these facilities available to the public going forward.
- iii) Participate in efforts to support Governor Baker's commitment to increase the Energy and Environmental Affairs operating budget, and DCR's share correspondingly, to 1% of the overall state budget.
- iv) Support efforts to increase capital funding as contemplated in the Environmental Bond to provide for increased funding to address deferred maintenance, climate adaptation and other priorities.

Climate

DCR is responsible for much of the Commonwealth's valued and vulnerable resources, encompassing waterways, islands, coasts, woodlands and other habitats. As stewards of these important natural resources, DCR must prepare for the impacts of climate changes as part of a comprehensive plan for the

Commonwealth in concert with the myriad of agencies and organizations facing this critical issue. Flooding, erosion, severe weather, and habitat shifts are beginning to change both the landscape and the operations of this open space agency.

The Commonwealth has a leadership role to play in acknowledging and understanding the impacts of climate change, as well as developing a plan for its mitigation and adaptation. To that end, the Baker Administration has adopted a vision to guide its climate strategy:

Lead the nation in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and safeguarding our Commonwealth from the impacts of climate change through citizen engagement, science, and cost-effective policy.

Through Executive Order 569, Cabinet Secretaries are required to appoint climate coordinators who, by September 2018, are expected to assess the Commonwealth's vulnerability to climate change and extreme weather events and incorporate those findings into existing policies and plans in each agency. Central to the effort is integrating climate adaptation and hazard mitigation in one plan. To do so, current efforts call for utilizing staff and resources that exist already and incorporating climate change preparedness into current planning, budgeting and policy frameworks.

Climate "sectors" of significant interest to DCR and its Stewardship Council include: agriculture (parks hosting agriculture practices); coastal zones (marshland, seawalls/beaches); energy (dams, street lighting, flood avoidance pumps); forestry (invasives, fire); infrastructure (critical urban arteries); natural resources/habitats (invasives); public safety & emergency response (fire, other); recreation (public safety); and water resources (dams, drinking water reservoirs). The scope of DCR's mission and operations will require the agency to engage in the effort on many fronts.

During the past several years the Council has received briefings on general climate matters, including adaptation provisions contained in Resource Management Plans. Briefings from internal and external experts to promote a deeper understanding of the climate challenges facing the agency will continue. As we work with the agency to evaluate and implement Executive Order 569, we will focus on the following:

- i) Advocacy for a measurable increase in the agency's planning capacity and/or revising DCR's planning priorities will be needed to accommodate the ongoing demands of Executive Order 569;
- ii) Adaptation planning will require we revisit the glacial pace the agency has been able to achieve on Resource Management plans (*see Park Management*) due to staff shortages and determine how the climate adaptation efforts should sync with existing and as-yet undeveloped resource management plans;
- iii) Adaptation findings and recommendations may change priorities for deferred maintenance and other capital projects and may require a

- closer review of future capital budgets. In this regard the agency also faces staff shortages affecting engineers, whose role in the oversight of capital projects is essential; and
- iv) In implementing its Asset Management Modernization system throughout the agency, incorporating adaptation and hazard mitigation functionality will be important.
 - v) Stressing, in internal and external communications, the importance of recognizing that properties that are vulnerable to flooding and erosion require special consideration when building or re-building; a long term view regarding how climate change may impact projects in future decades must influence decisions regarding DCR construction or re-construction in sensitive areas.

Park Management

Planning

Since the initiation of the most recent Oversight Strategy the Stewardship Council has worked with DCR staff to develop Resource Management plans for entire park Complexes² in an attempt to speed progress in achieving our mandate to implement RMPs across the agency. In addition, we advised staff to complete all RMPs for all South Region complexes before moving on to other regions. This has not proven possible given the availability of field staff and the readiness and availability of data in the remaining planning units³.

Of the 32 DCR park complexes across the state, since the inception of the Stewardship Council, DCR has managed to complete resource management plans for:

- 5 park complexes in their entirety (Esplanade, Walden, Blue Hills, Nickerson and Mt Holyoke – total of 54 individual parks/planning units); and
- 18 parks/planning units in 6 more complexes.

RMPs are underway in 3 more complexes covering 25 parks/planning units.

No plans have been completed or are underway for any of the remaining 298 parks/planning units in the remaining 18 complexes across the state.

These results hint at the enormity of the challenge facing DCR's planning staff, a challenge exacerbated over the past 5 years by a significant diminution in planning staff on which these planning efforts rely. Clearly, the Council cannot count on ever achieving Resource Management Plans for all parks and Complexes within our lifetime. Moreover, if DCR now needs to overlay additional planning provisions for climate adaptation and hazard mitigation using existing staff, we definitely will need to reconsider our approach to

² Complexes are collections of individual parks proximate to each other within individual Regions.

³ Planning units are most often parks but also include other significant assets such as rinks, pools, boat ramps, etc.

RMPs. The agency does not have the staff capacity to do both. We might consider gravitating to plans at a much higher level, similar to what we did in establishing Landscape Designations for DCR's forests, notwithstanding our statutory charter.

Asset Management

The Council is pleased with the progress the agency is making in developing a new Asset Management Modernization system. Presently, the agency has no reliable asset management and work order processing system. As a consequence, compiling quantitative information on the level of work required to maintain DCR's assets at reasonable standards of repair and performance currently is impossible. The Council will continue to work with the Agency to implement this new capability and ensure it increases the agency's efficiency in managing and maintaining its assets and transparently reporting on the resources that will be required to bring any and all assets up to desired standards of performance. After learning from the Phase I pilot across four facilities (Borderland, Bradley Palmer, Mohawk, Quinsigamond), we look forward to Phase II which will incorporate DCR rinks, pools and the Blackstone Visitor center, and ultimately assimilating the entire DCR system. This is an enormous and essential multi-year undertaking to which the Commissioner and his staff are committed. They will require support from the Council, the Administration and the Legislature.

Communications & Accountability

DCR's responsiveness and consistency in communicating and following-through with its myriad stakeholders has suffered as staffing has been cut back in virtually every department. Without the expectation of additional resources, the agency embarked on an effort to improve communications and customer experience through its Agile Scrum process. This effort resulted in the development of a customer tracking system to track all external communications with the agency, those matters that are resolved or closed, and those matters which remain "open" or in process. Internally the agency has produced a directory and resource guide in order to enable all DCR staff to direct its constituents to the direct staff in order to resolve complaints and other matters. Under a separate timeline the agency has been developing its capability to automate the generation, tracking and reporting on work orders as part of its Asset Management Modernization program.

The lack of reliable methods of communication among staff, some isolated in certain areas has impaired efficient operation. The Commissioner and Administration have made a commitment to enhance communications by providing additional technology such as WiFi, smart phones, software upgrades and work order reporting systems which are critical to improving response times and maximizing staff resources and connectivity. .

The Stewardship Council intends to oversee and assist the agency in corralling the necessary resources to continue improving its internal and external

communications and to develop greater visibility into who and what departments are responsible for resolving external requests. This is likely to entail:

- i) Monitoring of and support for the Constituent Tracking System by regularly reviewing a system report;
- ii) Continuing to refine and make widely available agency directory and resource guides to assist constituents in connecting with the appropriate personnel;
- iii) Continuing to improve internal procedures to ensure the public is readily directed to the correct staff/department to address their particular issue;
- iv) Ensuring the functionality of the Asset Management Modernization system allows for staff to quickly monitor progress on outstanding work requests and ensures staff responsible for completing those tasks have done/are doing so;
- v) Creating a capital project dashboard for ongoing, planned and unplanned/identified projects to facilitate regular updates and status reports to the legislature and key constituencies.
- vi) Continuing to support funding for improving and facilitating internal communications to ensure the Agency's success.