



# Stewardship Council

## *Strategic Oversight Plan* *2023-2025*

### **Stewardship Council**

*Department of Conservation and Recreation*

**dcr**  
*Massachusetts*



*Jack Buckley, Chair*

*Melissa Harper, Vice Chair*

*Ann Canedy, Secretary*

*Jeff Collins*

*Dicken Crane*

*Phil Doherty*

*Edward Dooley*

*Vivian Ortiz*

*Kevin O'Shea*

*Susan Smiley*

*Dennis Smith*

*Jennifer Wilson*

Strategic Oversight Plan

Stewardship Council, Department of Conservation and Recreation

October 12, 2023

## Introduction

The DCR Stewardship Council, established by the legislature in 2003, is an independent body that assists and oversees the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Councilors are appointed by the Governor. The Council has a number of specific responsibilities, including oversight and approval of 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. Preparing and issuing an oversight plan is also a responsibility of the Council by statute.<sup>1</sup>

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 sales 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.<sup>2</sup> The outdoor recreation industry is a significant employer in the state.

The parks, programs, reservations and forests under DCR's management are central to many of our society's most pressing needs, such as climate change, biodiversity, environmental justice, and public health. DCR lands represent an enormous asset to help us address these issues.

This Stewardship Council Strategic Oversight Plan incorporates brief reports on the Council's activities over the past several years, and it articulates the Council's priorities for the next two-year period, which can be broadly summarized as follows:

1. Continue to Improve Council Governance/Transparency: The Council will build upon its recent practices of regular elections, publicized calendars and a reliable public comment process. It should seek to eliminate Councilor vacancies and pursue the statutory amendments that would support healthy and measured Councilor recruitment and turnover.
2. Drive Meaningful Progress on RMPs: The Council will seek Commissioner commitment to a timeline for RMP completion and prioritization of the internal review process within DCR. The Council will establish a calendar for regular review of RMPs at Council meetings with a goal of moving toward not only completion of all RMPs, but their dynamic updating and use.
3. Continue Finance Partnership and Advocacy: The Council will continue to articulate annual budget priority recommendations. The Finance Committee will continue to work with its partners at DCR to get "ahead" of the budget process as the statute contemplates and to tackle particular budget issues and tools, with a dashboard for capital backlog as a high priority goal. The Council will continue to urge legislators and policymakers to evaluate and consider the

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts General Law Part I, Title II, Chapter 21, Section 2G. A draft of this Plan was published for public comment from July 24 - August 22, 2023. The Council appreciates public comment received, which can be viewed on the Council's website.

<sup>2</sup> Data from the Outdoor Industry Association.

importance of DCR's facilities, lands, and programs to the public health (physical and mental), economic stability, climate resiliency, environmental justice, and biodiversity.

4. Spotlight Climate Change and Biodiversity: The Council will seek regular updates and presentations about how the DCR is contributing to objectives of the 2050 Decarbonization Road Map, BioMap, State Wildlife Action Plan, Forest Action Plan and other strategic approaches to addressing the climate and biodiversity crises.

5. Regularly Review and Provide Input on DCR Strategic Direction: The Council will seek updates at least annually from the Commissioner on the strategic plan and direction of the agency, including with respect to the recommendations and goals of the Special Commission report of 2021 and the Strategic Readiness Initiative of 2022.

6. Support Productive Stakeholder Engagement: The Council, especially through its Stakeholder Committee, seeks to make it easier to foster additional enhanced collaboration between external partners (such as friends and environmental groups) with DCR. To accomplish this goal, the focus is on advocating for more resources to support partnership development and management, the development and refreshing of tools and agreements to streamline processes, and encouraging consistent communications and transparency in regard to partnership opportunities and projects.

### **Council Structure, Role and Governance**

The Council meets monthly, except in August. Prior to the pandemic, the Council held its meetings at a variety of Commonwealth properties within the DCR's jurisdiction, both for Councilor education and awareness and to facilitate public participation from different geographic locations within the Commonwealth. The pandemic revealed that remote meetings provide a convenient opportunity to allow broader attendance from members of the public while reducing the travel burden for Councilors. Recognizing that in-person opportunities for interaction are critical for any well functioning body, the Council currently pursues a calendar of mixed virtual and in-person meetings.

The Council, by statute, is created as a 13-person body, with most members representing different geographies and some representing certain non-profit organizations with a natural common interest in the Commonwealth's parklands. Councilors are volunteers, and receive reimbursement of some expenses but no compensation or stipend for their role. Members serve for seven-year terms. The current members and their term expirations are listed on [Appendix A](#). As of July 2023, only one seat is vacant on the Council – one of the environmental seats. A list of nominees for this open seat was submitted on July 10, 2023. The Council has rarely had a full complement of 13 councilors in its history. The appointment process rests in the Governor's office, but the Council has identified that the seven-year term is possibly one barrier to recruiting potential strong candidates, and has proposed amending its enabling statute to create five-year terms. More concerning, the Council notes that as currently established, nine member terms expire in the same year (2025), and that staggered terms would promote a smooth and robust turnover of members balanced with retention of institutional memory and history. These changes are two of several that the Council has identified for potential legislative amendment.

## **Nominations and Elections of DCR Stewardship Council Officers**

The selection and service of Stewardship Council officers was informal for many years. The enabling legislation states that the Council “shall elect, at least annually, its own chairman and secretary, and shall make the appointments required to be made by it in the manner herein provided.” In 2018 the Council held a formal election of officers, added a vice-chair as an officer, and subsequently held elections for chair, vice-chair, and secretary in December of each year.

In 2023 the Council adopted guidelines which formally created a three-member nominating committee, appointed by the chair, to further clarify and standardize its procedure for electing officers.

### **Committees**

The Council meets monthly, with meetings including reports from the DCR Commissioner and Council chair, public comment and various informational presentations from DCR staff and adjacent organizations. Much of the work of the Council is conducted through committees:

- **Nominating:** This standing committee, first formally created by a vote of the Council in 2023,<sup>3</sup> is tasked with presenting a slate of candidates for office to the Council annually at the December meeting.
- **Finance:** The Finance Committee assists with the oversight and preparation of the DCR annual operating and capital budget to align with the business strategy and monitors the financial management of the agency. The responsibilities of the committee are to work with the staff to prepare and establish the operating and capital budget of the agency, advocate for that budget as appropriate, and report progress against the approved budget to the Stewardship Council.
- **Stakeholders:** The Stakeholders Committee assists and supports relationships with external stakeholders that have an interest in developing relationships with DCR and its properties. The responsibilities of the committee include supporting and facilitating positive relationships with external stakeholders and developing standardized policies and procedures that support these relationships.
- **Policy:** The Policy Committee assists and provides oversight on key operational issues and projects as well as on policies and issues that affect the priorities of the agency. The responsibilities of the committee may change over time and may include but are not limited to topics such as the Asset Modernization System, Resource Management Plans, climate adaptation, article 97 requests, and other topics deemed necessary by the Council.
- **Natural Resources:** Creation of a committee focused on natural resources conservation and management was proposed in early 2023. The Stewardship Council will discuss and reach a final decision on the proposal by the end of 2023.

### **Master Calendar**

In an effort to improve reliability and set expectations for itself, the DCR and the public, the Council will maintain an annual calendar of its activities and responsibilities. This calendar will set forth the cadence

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<sup>3</sup> The Council had previously employed an ad hoc nominating committee for its officer slates in 2021 and 2022.

of annual and semi-annual efforts by the Council (and its various committees) to meet statutory requirements and other goals, including those embodied in this Plan. It is expected that this effort will be a dynamic embodiment of the annual objectives for the Council as well as special needs that naturally arise periodically. The current draft is included in [Appendix B](#). This initial effort may appear modest, but is a new exercise; all Councilors look forward to improving our effectiveness through this effort and its future iterations.

### **Transparency Around Decision-Making**

As a public body subject to open-meeting law, the Council meetings are a natural environment for transparent communication about the DCR. Numerous processes and activities in which the DCR engages are subject to their own public comment periods (i.e., public projects and RMPs), but the Council meetings are a logical locus for “big picture” conversations before the public.

The Council has sought to improve its process for comment from members of the public at meetings by approving guidelines (available on the Council’s web page) and also monitoring comments for appropriate follow-up from its partners at the agency. The Council seeks to work with the Commissioner to further improve this follow-up and communication.

The Council encourages the DCR to take advantage of the forum provided by its monthly meetings to communicate early with respect to matters that may seem particularly complicated, controversial, or of especially high public interest. As appropriate, the Council will seek input on such issues from a range of perspectives, through staff or external presentations. If and where the Council and/or DCR appear to fall short on transparency, the Council will promote a review of decision-making process and explanation of decision outcomes.

### **Special Commission Report & Strategic Readiness Initiative**

A Special Commission, established by Section 100 of Chapter 41 of the Acts of 2019, worked throughout 2021 to recommend ways DCR could improve the management, operations, and asset condition of its natural, cultural, and recreational resources and to determine whether any of DCR’s departments, divisions, assets, or operations should be transferred to another agency, department, or entity, with special consideration given to urban parks and roadways. In response to the Special Commission’s call to develop an agency-wide strategic plan, DCR staff created the Strategic Readiness Roadmap.

The Stewardship Council will request an annual report from the Commissioner on his strategic direction for the agency, and will periodically review progress towards the recommendations laid out in the Special Commission Report and Strategic Readiness Roadmap. In some cases, this may include reassessment of a recommendation or its priority. These projects (Special Commission and Strategic Readiness Initiative) emerged from a legislative effort initiated before the pandemic, and are described in [Appendix C](#).

### **Budget & Finance**

The Finance Committee works to develop annual budget recommendations for the Council. In addition, the Committee, working through monthly meetings, conducts ongoing discussions with DCR financial staff on operations and capital budgets. The Finance Committee is currently working closely with staff responsible for the capital budget to develop a capital budget dashboard that will make capital

expenditures more transparent and predictable. (Currently the work for this is the subject of an RFP.) The lack of transparency with respect to the capital budget process has resulted in significant public and legislative frustration, and a tool for measuring and tackling capital backlog is a high priority.

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, each year the Finance Committee holds a listening session to specifically gather public comment on budget priorities. This iterative monthly process has provided the Finance Committee and the Council with an understanding of the needs and opportunities facing DCR. The Finance Committee provides an annual budget priorities recommendation for the Council's consideration at the July Council meeting. The Council will conduct an annual review with DCR to assess the implementation of these annual recommendations.

The Council's recommendations for each fiscal year are approved annually (generally in July) focus on specific initiatives for the agency for the coming year and can be found on the Council's web site. 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.

## **Land & Asset Stewardship**

### **Resource Management Plans**

The Council is required to review and adopt resource management plans ("RMPs") presented by the Commissioner for "all reservations, parks, and forests under the management of the department," which are meant to include "guidelines for the operation and land stewardship" and "for the protection and stewardship of natural and cultural resources" – balancing "recreation, resource protection, and sustainable forest management."<sup>4</sup> Entering 2019, DCR's process for producing RMPs was thorough and exhaustive, producing lengthy documents that identified needs and operational guidelines, but were also an extensive description of the site. The significant time and effort required to produce these RMPs was proving a process that would stand in the way of many parks ever receiving a timely RMP in a reasonable timeframe.<sup>5</sup>

The Stewardship Council and the DCR worked to approve a more streamlined RMP format that would facilitate completion of the critical analysis and forward thought to create a stewardship plan, while relegating some of the previously included content to other arenas ancillary to the purpose of the plan. This format was approved in 2020, after extensive public meeting and discussion, and with great optimism for completing plans for the more than two-thirds of DCR properties without a plan in a reasonable timeframe of years, not decades.

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<sup>4</sup> Massachusetts General Law Part I, Title II, Chapter 21, Section 2F.

<sup>5</sup> The 2018-2019 Strategic Oversight Plan lamented that the RMPs were unlikely to ever be completed "in our lifetime."

Despite good intentions and hard work, as well as the conversion of some seasonal planner positions to full time, the RMP production, review, public comment and approval process continues to move slowly. The Council has yet to receive for approval a single plan under the new format, although it did approve a “legacy” plan in 2022 and anticipates more before 2023 is complete.

The Council – and we think the DCR – see the RMP documents as foundational elements in good stewardship, robust recreation, and responsible conservation. Done well, the RMPs should be living documents that drive DCR priorities, budget requests, capital expenditures and investments in land conservation and management.

Going forward, the Council seeks a commitment from the Commissioner to prioritize steady production of RMPs, with dedicated resources to ensure the thorough work needed to meet their requirements. This includes not just a group of employees to manage the many complicated aspects – site visits, mapping, interagency conversations, public input, etc. -- but also, critically, creating a culture within the DCR of responsive review by others who are required to sign off on the various elements. We can’t speak to the best way to accomplish this internally, whether it be a policy of constructive sign off within certain time frames, hiring more personnel, or revising job descriptions. But we are eager to lend our support to what the DCR tells us might be required.

In addition, our intention going forward is to allow the Policy Committee to continue to monitor the process and be responsive to RMP issues as they arise, with draft RMPs presented to the Council at meetings scheduled twice a year for consideration and, if appropriate, adoption. We ask the Commissioner to partner with us to identify a time certain goal (though years away) by which every DCR park, forest, and reservation will have received the attention and analysis necessary to result in a proposed plan. We can also then look forward to addressing the updating of completed plans as needed, as true dynamic guiding documents, and to monitoring the progress of their objectives.

### **Climate Change & Biodiversity**

The Core Principles articulated in the Strategic Readiness Roadmap include “conserv[ing] lands, water, and forests by integrating science, research, and technical expertise into the management of our natural resources” and “advanc[ing] climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts by implementing sustainable practices and advancing resiliency across our infrastructure, assets, and resources”.

The Massachusetts Endangered Species Act (321 CMR 10.00) requires that “localities on state owned lands that provide habitat for state listed species shall be managed for the benefit of such listed species. Said agencies shall give management priority to the protection, conservation, and restoration of Endangered, Threatened, and Special Concern species occurring on state owned lands. All practicable means and measures shall be taken to resolve conflicts between the protection, conservation, and restoration of state listed species on state owned lands and other uses of such lands in favor of the listed species.”

Finally, the Commonwealth’s Forests as Climate Solutions Initiative and Resilient Lands Initiative set a goal of permanently protecting 30% of our land by 2030, an increase from our current 27%. Achieving that goal will require a doubling of the pace of land conservation across all land conservation sectors – state, federal, municipal, and non-profit.



The Stewardship Council will seek regular updates on how DCR is addressing these core principles, statutory responsibilities, and administration priorities. The Council will review how DCR lands and operations are contributing to the Massachusetts 2050 Decarbonization Road Map, BioMap, State Wildlife Action Plan, 2020 Forest Action Plan, and other statewide goals; how land conservation and stewardship policies and programs are responding to the interrelated threats of climate change and biodiversity loss; and how DCR operating and capital budgets are being directed to conserve, restore, and steward our natural heritage.

The Council supports the recent creation of the Office of Climate Resilience focused on ensuring that climate change considerations are incorporated into agency initiatives and projects and creation of the Office of Research. In the coming years, the Council will focus on ensuring that these programs, along with land conservation and natural resource management programs, are adequately staffed and resourced. The Council will also encourage DCR leadership to align regulatory authorities, such as through the Office of Dam Safety, with biodiversity and climate resilience goals.

### **Stakeholder Engagement**

Over the past few years, the Stakeholder Committee has been heavily focused on improving the transparency and communication of the agency with partners and stakeholders. We have done so both by advocating for more resources and support within the agency for partner relationships while also leveraging the Council meetings themselves to showcase successful partnerships and raise awareness of critical issues and projects across the Commonwealth.

For example, the Stakeholder Committee established an online process for partners to request to be a Guest Presenter to the Council at its monthly meeting. Requests to present before the Council are extended to organizations with established ties to state parks, such as Friends of the Parks groups, environmental and watershed organizations. This has opened the door for the Council and the public to understand and value the contributions of many of these partners and resources to the DCR.

Looking to the future, the Stakeholder Committee will continue to focus on and promote the Strategic Readiness Initiative highlights and priorities related to constituent outreach. . The Committee will look to promote additional resources within DCR or EEA to fulfill this needed area of focus. Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Volunteer agreement documents will be refreshed within the organization as well as simplified for ease of approach (by partners/friends) and by DCR (legal/administration/watershed). The Stakeholder Committee will also work to coordinate the collaboration and benefit of these groups by working together for enhanced support to the DCR.

The coordination and strategic pursuit of expanded access to all State lands is of the utmost interest of the Stakeholder Committee. Therefore, working to create and maintain an assured diversity of use and access moving into or with a new Administration will be an area of continued priority. This may mean working across and/or establishing a revised approach once the Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation commences its established charter and goals. The Committee welcomes the creation of this Office as a key element in the DCR's core principle (articulated in its Strategic Readiness Roadmap and supported by the Council) to provide access to a diversity of outdoor recreational experiences and unique landscapes that is equitable, inclusive, and welcoming.

Continued advocacy for increasing the partnership capacity, not only within the agency but also through collaboration with the newly formed Office of Outdoor Recreation is a significant priority for the Stakeholders Committee. Successful partnerships create great benefits for the community as well as the agency and the committee will work to improve DCR's partnership capacity to better leverage its relationships with stakeholder groups and to increase the organization's transparency to provide better service to the community. There are many examples of the powerful impact of public-private partnerships including the visitors center at Walden Pond State Reservation, the Charlesgate Park Revitalization, and the Olmstead Tree Society. The Committee (and Council) seek to make more of these successful partnerships possible to provide a better experience to the citizens of the Commonwealth, and also to improve the visibility and reputation of the agency.

**Appendix A**

Councilors (in order of term expiration date)

<b>Councilor</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>First Appointment</b>	<b>Term Expiration</b>	<b>Committees/Office</b>
Dicken Crane	Berkshire	January 2020	April 12, 2025	Finance, Nominating
Susan Smiley	At Large – Worcester	January 2021	June 2, 2025	Stakeholders (Chair)
Jack Buckley	At Large – Middlesex	March 2019	June 15, 2025	Finance (Chair)/Council Chair
Phil Doherty	Urban Park – Norfolk	January 2023	June 16, 2025	Policy
Ann Canedy	At Large – Barnstable	November 2018	June 29, 2025	Policy/Council Secretary
Jeff Collins	Environmental	December 2020	July 15, 2025	Policy
Vivian Ortiz	Urban Park – Suffolk	September 2018	July 20, 2025	Stakeholders
Melissa Harper	Urban Park – Plymouth	April 2018	August 17, 2025	Stakeholders/ Council Vice Chair
Jennifer Wilson	Urban Park – Middlesex	April 2019	November 4, 2025	Policy (Chair), Nominating
Edward Dooley	Urban Park – Essex	July 2022	January 11, 2026	Stakeholders
Kevin O'Shea	Boston	January 2023	June 10, 2028	
Dennis Smith	At Large – Plymouth	February 2016	September 16, 2029	Nominating (Chair), Stakeholders
Vacant	Environmental			

**Appendix B**

Month	Council	Finance	Policy	Stakeholders
January		Governor's Budget Released		Review of Committees and Membership
February		Capital Budget/Deferred Maintenance		
March	Finance presentation on FY23 budget		RMPs	
April	RMPs	House Budget Post Notice for Budget Forum		
May		Senate Budget Budget Forum		Review of Park Serve Day
June Fish and Wildlife	Discuss public comments on budget and budget priorities for FY24	Conference Committee		
July	Council approve FY24 budget priorities	Governor Signs Budget Create Budget Recommendation	Presentation of oversight plan	
August	No Meeting	Veto Overrides Release budget Recommendation		
September	Approval of two-year Oversight Plan	General budget/finance discussion	Approval of oversight plan; RMPs	Create Survey for meeting dates
October	RMPs	General budget/finance discussion		Review of Survey Findings
November	Approval of Annual Meeting Schedule	General budget/finance discussion		Release meeting schedule for following year
December State House	Election of Officers	General budget/finance discussion		

**Special Commission Report**

A Special Commission, established by Section 100 of Chapter 41 of the Acts of 2019, worked throughout 2021 to:

- Recommend ways DCR could improve the management, operations, and asset condition of its natural, cultural, and recreational resources.
- Determine whether any of DCR's departments, divisions, assets, or operations should be transferred to another agency, department, or entity, with special consideration given to urban parks and roadways.

The legislation specified that the study should include, "a review of the capital and operating budgets of the department with an analysis at a component level of the relationship of cost to value; and recommendations on how to:

- improve transparency and accountability for project choice;
- maximize returns on the commonwealth's investment in the department of conservation and recreation; and
- improve project planning and execution, with special consideration given to the role of the stewardship council."

The University of Massachusetts Amherst Donahue Institute (UMDI) was contracted to conduct research on behalf of the commission, facilitate and support the work of the DCR Special Commission, and compile findings and recommendations into a final report. The report is available here online (<https://www.mass.gov/doc/umdi-dcr-special-commission-report/download>).

**Strategic Readiness Roadmap**

In response to this report's call to develop an agency-wide strategic plan, DCR staff created the Strategic Readiness Roadmap in June 2022, [available here online \(https://www.mass.gov/doc/strategic-readiness-roadmap-final-report/download\)](https://www.mass.gov/doc/strategic-readiness-roadmap-final-report/download). The intent of the roadmap is to build the foundation for DCR's future by establishing principles that will guide decision making and planning. The roadmap lays the groundwork for future big ideas as well as immediate operational improvements.

The Strategic Readiness Roadmap articulates DCR's mission and core principles:

- Mission: To protect, promote and enhance our common wealth of natural, cultural, and recreational resources for the well-being of all.
- Core Principles:
  - Provide access to a diversity of outdoor recreational experiences and unique landscapes that is equitable, inclusive, and welcoming.
  - Conserve lands, water, and forests by integrating science, research, and technical expertise into the management of our natural resources.
  - Advance climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts by implementing sustainable practices and advancing resiliency across our infrastructure, assets, and resources.

- Support healthy communities by providing places for people to connect with nature and each other.
- Inspire generations of stewards by recognizing and honoring our legacy through partnerships, public engagement, and education.

The roadmap provides 20 recommendations:

## Recommendations

