

2015-2016

Stewardship Council Oversight Strategy

dcr
Massachusetts



DCR Stewardship Council

*Department of Conservation & Recreation
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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) in its efforts to establish programs and policies to realize goals set forth by the Executive branch and the Massachusetts General Court and to meet the public's expectations that its parks, reservations and forests will be protected and available for the enjoyment of the millions of people who visit these facilities each year. 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 throughout the agency's holdings.

The Massachusetts Stewardship Oversight Strategy incorporates brief encapsulations of the Council's activities over the previous two-year period and articulates its priorities for 2015-2016. This document is divided into four sections: Climate & Policy; Park Management; Financial/Budget; and Statutory Responsibilities. As noted before, the Council recognizes that circumstances change and the policy agenda must be shuffled, be that the result of disruptive weather events, invasive species or unforeseen developments such as pipeline proposals and other developments. So we adjust.

Climate & Policy

Climate

DCR is responsible for much of the Commonwealth's valued and vulnerable resources, encompassing waterways, islands, coasts, woodlands and other habitats. As steward 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 will change both the landscape and the operations of this open space agency. The time is now to undertake the work to best prepare and confront these challenges, now and in the future.

The best and most recent actionable evidence on climate change comes from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fifth Assessment. In its synthesis report, *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report*,¹ the IPCC has made the following conclusions:

- The Earth is warming and the trend continues.
- Globally averaged sea level rise is occurring, and the rate of rise observed is faster than previously observed and predicted.
- It is extremely likely humans are the dominant cause of a warming climate.

¹ Available at: <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>

- The consequences of these trends include increased storm frequency and intensity, increased coastal flooding, food and water shortages, increased displacement of people, and increased poverty.

The Commonwealth has a role to play in acknowledging and understanding the impacts of climate change, as well as taking a lead in its mitigation and adaptation. Current strategies developed and undertaken by Massachusetts include the Massachusetts Global Warming Solutions Act, the Massachusetts Climate Change Adaptation Report, Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2020, and related initiatives.² Included in these strategies and initiatives is Executive Order 484, which commits state agencies like DCR to greenhouse gas reduction targets of 40% by 2020 and 80% by 2050 from a baseline.

Besides mandatory initiatives like Executive Order 484, DCR is in a unique position to play a leading role in climate mitigation and adaptation measures as the stewards of state public lands. For example, DCR can best protect its natural resources and capital assets from climate change impacts by implementing immediate “no regrets” actions, developing a comprehensive adaptation management plan, and integrating natural resource functions into those plans.

Immediate “no regrets” actions may include:

- Implementing the recommendations from EEA’s Climate Change Adaptation Report
- Committing the resources to and institutionalizing the 2010 DCR Forest Futures Visioning Process and the resulting 2012 “Landscape Designations for DCR Parks & Forests: Selection Criteria and Management Guidelines”; this is already underway
- Collaborating with MA DFW and the MA Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program to prioritize and support management and restoration focused on the most vulnerable species and ecosystems
- Focused land protection and applying the latest conservation science information to land protection planning and priorities; and
- Acquiring high-resolution topography as generated by LiDAR to better identify vulnerable properties and facilities.

The comprehensive plan may include:

- Appointing a task force to implement the “no regrets” actions and develop a longer term plan
- Conducting a vulnerability study of DCR natural resources and assets
- Identifying those resources at most risk and instituting a procedure for deciding whether to repair, replace, or remove them based on the relative risks and costs.
- Setting goals, prioritizing actions, identifying resources and funding, and setting timelines.

² Current initiatives as of 2015 can be found here: <http://www.mass.gov/eea/air-water-climate-change/climate-change/>

DCR can draw from the rich base of recommendations and plans already available, including: Climate Change Adaptation, Coastal Hazards, Beaches and Coastal Erosion. Driving DCR decision-making should be the use of best practices that prioritize, where appropriate, natural capital and ecosystem values in ways that complement existing DCR obligations for the prioritization and management of public lands.³ This will likely require DCR to make planning decisions today that incorporate future needs based on assumptions of climate change.

The Council is prepared to assist in advising this effort and in advocating for the commitment of funding to assist DCR in undertaking this role.

Policy Development

Over the past two years the Council's Policy Committee has approved new policies to govern DCR's operation (Consolidated DEM/MDC Code of Regulations and Volunteers-in-Parks Policy) while reviewing the status of efforts to implement other policies, including an overview of the agency's partnership program, a review of its Dam Safety program and funding levels, a review of the agency's implementation and experience with its Off-Highway Vehicle Management program, an initial survey of the Blue Hills Reservation deer population to guide next steps, and an overview of DCR's obligations and challenges in responding to recent pipeline proposals across Western and Central Massachusetts. In addition the Council reviewed and adopted revised fee structures and levels to ensure their uniform application across the Commonwealth and their appropriateness relative to the fees charged for similar park services in neighboring states. These revisions were designed to increase revenues for DCR while ensuring that the public retained access to state facilities at reasonable and fair prices. These new fees took effect in January 2015 and are expected to generate an additional \$1.9 million for park operations by FY 16.

In addition to the Climate priority outlined above and other policies which may need to be modified or developed to meet new and unforeseen challenges, the Council will continue to regularly review the implementation of DCR policies.

Park Management

DCR Planning staff worked hard to revise and streamline the agency's process for formulating and developing Resource Management Plans. Importantly DCR stepped away from an effort to streamline plans for less significant parks while devoting more time to more publicly significant units by clustering park units into larger planning units. As a result, in marginally more time it once took to create a resource management plan for one park unit

³ For example, public land designated as "Zone 1" (highly sensitive resources requiring special management approaches) under current land stewardship zoning employed by DCR should be managed in a way that ensures, to the extent practicable, the ecosystem values of the wilderness areas are maintained. For illustrative purposes, Zone 1 areas along public beaches may require a land use planning approach that anticipates the need for coastal zone features (dunes, sea grasses, etc.) to move landward with sea level rise. Thus, planning today might require prohibitions on developing adjacent coastal land designated "Zone 2" (resources that support recreation and management activities appropriate to the site) understanding some or all of that land may become Zone 1 areas in the future.

the agency can now produce a plan for multiple parks within a planning unit. The Council hopes this will accelerate the agency's ability to work through the backlog of overdue and non-existent plans.

In the first 5 years the Council was able to approve RMPs for 12 park units. With the revised process, in the following two years the Council approved plans for Walden Pond State Reservation and for three additional planning units: the Harold Parker and Boxford State Forest Planning Unit, the Mount Holyoke Range Planning Unit, and the Lowell/Great Brook Planning Unit. These planning units included 14 separate parks/reservations. Also, The Myles Standish RMP was updated to include nearby facilities.

As departmental budgets and staffing continued to constrain both planning and operations within the department, DCR re-organized its facilities into "complexes" of parks / forests / reserves within geographical areas. RMPs are now being done for the entire "complex", with chapters on the individual facilities within the complex. There will be a more standard set of data to be included, and more of the data in the report will be presented in tables, rather than paragraphs. The Charles River Esplanade / New Basin Complex is the first RMP to be completed with this new approach (6 units). Furthermore, at the recommendation of the planning staff, the Council intends to focus planning efforts on one region at a time to finish that region, then move on to a different one. The southeast region will be completed first.

Financial/Budget

The plight of DCR's operating budget has not changed significantly during the two-year period since our last Strategic Oversight Plan. The current operating budget still falls well below the FY2001 high-water mark of \$110 million. At the same time the scope of DCR's responsibilities has increased during that period. There are, however, a number of bright spots:

1. The agency's capital budget has increased from \$103 million in 2014 to \$148 million in 2015;
2. We have successfully restructured the fees at DCR and increased a number of them to a level at or below the median of fees charged by neighboring states for similar services; and
3. The operating budget has increased somewhat from \$77.8 million (less earmarks) in FY14 to \$80.3 million (less earmarks and 9C cuts) in FY15.

Even at this level, unfortunately, DCR must continue to shutter and/or remove staff from parks, cut back on its services and reduce FTE and seasonal head count through attrition. The Council is seriously concerned that the staffing at DCR is too thin to effectively ensure its new capital budget is deployed and spent effectively and the new investments are adequately maintained.

In response the Stewardship Council is focusing on three financial priorities:

- 1) Join the advocacy community and the administration to achieve its commitment to increase DCR's (and other Energy and Environment Agencies) to a level equaling

1% of the state budget. The Council estimates this would increase DCR's operating budget to over \$110 million.

- 2) Engage the administration each year, prior to the release of its budget, until the Retained Revenue Cap is eliminated. The Council will advocate the retained revenue cap be eliminated in FY16 in order to capture the upside of the recently-revised fees. The Council will continue its efforts with the Legislature and advocacy groups where appropriate and necessary to improve operating budgets of DCR after the administration's budget is released.
- 3) We will reintroduce an effort to sponsor an operating "gap analysis". The Council believes it is critical to take a step back in order to move DCR ahead. In order to wisely invest its financial and human resources, DCR needs a standardized, data-driven approach to measuring its overall output and productivity. With a small \$200,000 investment in consulting services, DCR could develop a standardized framework and set of metrics that could be used to prioritize where to optimally allocate existing resources across the state. The goal would be not only to evaluate current efficiency and service delivery, but also to deliver a product that the agency can use over and over to prioritize resource needs and investment and to convince the legislature and executive to fund those needs.

To that end the Council will recommend the funding of an independent, 6-month effort to create a financial and operational system to guide how operating funds should be deployed across DCR. This system should prioritize facilities based on simple criteria, determine existing resource allocations to each unit, evaluate staffing patterns and needs, determine standard service levels for each category of facility, and determine where additional operating funds should be invested given existing resource levels and investment need.

Statutory Responsibility

During the past two years the Stewardship Council promoted legislation to amend its statutory obligations to more closely reflect our 10 years of experience and sheer practicalities of accommodating a geographically dispersed, volunteer Council with no staff or budget. We will "dust-off" key aspects of the previous proposal and meet with interested parties to get their advice and support up front. Once done we hope to identify champions in the legislature who will file the legislation and shepherd it through to adoption.