



## LAWMAKERS SOUND OFF, SAY CONSTITUENTS ANGRY ABOUT STATE OF PARKS SYSTEM

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, DEC. 6, 2006.....Describing chest-high weeds, closed bathrooms, and extensive trash problems, state lawmakers who joined the Romney administration in slashing funding for the state's public parks system pledged today to reinvest in that system and to pitch their proposal as an important quality of life issue.

Convened today by Rep. Michael Rush (D-West Roxbury) and former Department of Conservation and Recreation Commissioner Kathy Abbott, lawmakers voiced support for a multi-year plan to address cleanliness, public safety and public health problems in a system that features skating rinks, playgrounds, golf courses and walking trails.

Rush plans to take the lead over the next few weeks to "formulate a legislative game plan" for next year.

Lawmakers did not identify a new funding source or a plan to secure existing funds and while they have the power to control revenue and spending decisions on Beacon Hill, they affixed most of the blame for failing parks on the Romney administration and told horror stories about an inability to communicate with the department he manages.

Abbott described a parks system maintenance backlog estimated at \$1.2 billion, and expressed hope that Governor-elect Deval Patrick would play a pivotal role in championing a parks revival. She said the Conservation and Recreation Campaign she leads plans to release a report in early January describing the major economic impact of the recreation industry and showing how property values increase in areas near adequately funded recreation spots. An awareness campaign will stir talk about the parks system and elevate it from its "mid-tier" status, she said.

According to the campaign, the budgets of DCR and the Department of Fish and Game have been cut by more than 30 percent since 2001, Massachusetts recently ranked last in the nation in state and local spending on park and recreation as a percentage of personal income, and half of state park campgrounds are unstaffed over night. The campaign also says 320,000 acres outside of metro Boston are patrolled by five rangers, and that a 10,000-acre state forest with a swimming beach, campsites and half a million visitors per year has only two-fulltime employees.

After Rush suggested "I think we can only move forward if we air some of the dirty laundry," legislators responded with enthusiasm, making clear that residents all over Massachusetts are fed up with the state of public lands.

"It is the one agency that is the most frustrating to deal with," Rep. Ruth Provost (D-Somerville) said of DCR.

With six parks in his district, Gardner Democrat Robert Rice called overflowing trash barrels on Mondays and Tuesdays a regular occurrence. Beer bottles are often strewn "all over the place," Rice said. Staff cuts, Rice said, mean the safety and cleanliness levels of parks are down.

Rep. Michael Moran (D-Brighton) said he's accustomed to peeved constituents calling about stuffed trash

barrels around the reservoir near Cleveland Circle. “Their solution to the problem was to get rid of the barrels completely,” Moran said, referring to the DCR.

Rep. Robert Coughlin (D-Dedham) said fencing near Mother Brook in Dedham is so damaged that he fears children are in danger of “sliding through into the water.” Due to the safety concerns, municipal officials stepped in to make repairs on DCR property. “I don’t even know if it’s legal,” Coughlin said. “But it needs to happen because someone is going to get hurt.” He added: “It’s wrong that us as a Legislature aren’t doing what’s needed.”

Rep. Paul Donato (D-Medford), who explained how 40 percent of the land in his district is under DCR control, said lawmakers are frustrated because they can’t get answers from DCR to respond to residents who call them to vent about trash and safety concerns. “It’s sometimes days and maybe weeks before we get a response,” he said.

“We need some help,” Rep. Brian Wallace (D-South Boston) added, “and I know it’s money.”

Wallace said calls pour into his office when the weather improves in the “Irish Riviera,” as he called his district. Constituents upset about litter in parks or who are denied access to public bathrooms want answers, he said.

“David Balfour always returned calls,” Wallace said, referring to the former Metropolitan District Commission chief. The MDC has since been rolled into the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

DCR Commissioner Stephen Burrington, asked about the lawmaker’s complaints about communications, told the News Service in an interview that the department does its best to respond quickly and thoroughly to any complaints it receives. However, he said, the “enormous” volume of inquiries make it difficult to get to all of them in a timely fashion.

“Our performance is by no means what I would like it to be,” he said.

Burrington added: “Clear and timely communications are a top priority here. We have been working hard to track our performance in responding to people. We cannot always do everything people would like us to do right away, but there is no excuse for not responding to people.”

Burrington said the department’s staffing levels are down by 25 percent from five years ago and 40 percent from ten years ago. “Are there places that are in deplorable condition? Absolutely,” he said. “Are there places that are in terrific condition? Yes. Most places are in between.” He added: “The resource issue is very real and we will only be able to go so far at current resource levels.”

Sen. Michael Knapik (R-Westfield) described a need for \$2 million to repair a road that leads to a mountaintop in his district. “It’s not going to be easy to provide additional resources,” Knapik cautioned, hinting at the upcoming annual budget cycle and predictions that major new investments are difficult to make due to growth in fixed costs.

Rep. Anne Paulsen (D-Belmont), who is retiring from the Legislature and was plugged by Rush as his choice to lead DCR in 2007, said most states “would die for” the Massachusetts parks system, which took shape over the generations but is “not of great value unless it’s maintained.”

Public discourse in recent years has exulted the private sector as “more valuable and more interesting and more important” than the public sector, Paulsen said. Saying Deval Patrick’s election shows the power of grass roots campaigning, Paulsen called for a grass roots campaign on behalf of the parks system and renewed focus on the importance of public services, saying “those are the things that really make this state work.”

Rep. Frank Smizik, the co-chairman of the Legislature's Committee on the Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture, said the Massachusetts parks system "was a jewel" but has fallen into "disrepair and maintenance problems and a lack of people to manage the parks." But he said the funds would eventually be secured.

"The parks need about \$1.2 billion to be fixed up," Smizik said. "It's going to be done. That's a goal that we have on our committee."

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