

DCR Stewardship Council

FY 2023 Budget Priorities

Background

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. This iterative monthly process has provided the Council with an understanding of the needs and opportunities facing DCR.

The pandemic over the past year and a half 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. The outdoor recreation industry is a significant employer in the state. The Council urges policymakers to evaluate and consider the importance of DCR's facilities, lands, and programs to the Massachusetts outdoor economy and the Commonwealth's sales tax revenue.

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**: Support a new line item for digital marketing, branding, and outreach for state parks and programs with clear performance metrics.
- **Management**: Fully staff and fund the program responsible for the development of Resource Management Plans.

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.

Visibility: The historic levels of use of DCR properties over the last year 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.

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.

Budgetary Policy Priority

As a budgetary policy goal, the Council believes that all retained revenue generated by DCR programs and facilities should support those programs. As a principle, retained revenue should be based on the concept of user pay, user benefit, and DCR's programs. Facilities and lands should not be used as a source of general fund revenue.

Given the many social and economic benefits of our state parks and facilities, our parks should not be used as a source of revenue. Policymakers should evaluate the impact of retained revenue on DCR decision-making, especially whether it forces the agency to direct efforts toward increasing revenue at the expense of park and resource management.