

The Boston Globe

STATE'S PARKS NEED HELP

Date: July 14, 2006 Page: A14 Section: Editorial

THE F. GILBERT Hills State Forest in Foxborough is a well-used recreational attraction for residents of the state's fast-growing outer suburbs near Interstate 495. But like so many of the state's forests, parks, pools, rinks, and beaches, Gilbert Hills shows the effects of inadequate operating and maintenance funds. While the lawn around its headquarters building on a recent afternoon was mown and its trails cleared of blown-down branches, the building itself badly needs a paint job. More personnel patrolling the 1,027-acre forest might have dissuaded the person who dumped an old sofa on forest property.

But just since 2003, the Department of Conservation and Recreation has lost more than 13 percent of its workforce. It was in 2003 that Governor Romney promised the state a "world-class" parks system. Although spending for DCR is up slightly in the last two years to about \$83 million, Romney will fall far short of delivering on his pledge. In 2001, spending was at an inflation-adjusted level of almost \$125 million. The state pegs its backlog of infrastructure repair at about \$600 million.

In the early debates and speeches of this year's race for governor, the condition of the state's recreational facilities has received little attention. The voters will be cheated if this doesn't change before the primary in September and the final in November. Not only could greater investment in the parks play an important role in stemming the migration of young adults from the state, many of the parks, especially in the Berkshires and along Cape Cod and the coast, are an important draw for tourists, from in-state and out. But data compiled last year for the National Association of State Park Directors show the state's per capita spending for parks and forests is just \$4.85. That is well below the national average of \$6.10 and places Massachusetts at 34th in state rankings. The state would rate even lower if spending on parks were measured against average personal income.

Gilbert Hills draws most of its visitors from its immediate area, where it is popular with hikers, dog walkers, mountain bike riders, and users of off-road vehicles. Its biggest attraction to visitors from afar is that it is the only state forest east of the Berkshires that allows off-road vehicles. Like many parks in the eastern part of the state, housing development presses close on Gilbert Hills, increasing the need for protection against forest fires and also raising the risk of illegal dumping. Unfortunately, there are just six environmental enforcement officers for the southeastern region, which encompasses Gilbert Hills and 10 other state parks.

The nonprofit Trust for Public Lands is sponsoring its Conservation and Recreation Campaign, led by former DCR commissioner Katherine F. Abbott, with a goal of getting the state to increase operating funds for DCR by \$10 million a year for four years. That additional \$40 million a year would go a long way toward bringing the state a truly "world-class" parks system.

So far, the candidates for governor are unwilling to take a position for or against the \$40 million increase, although most recognize a need for catch-up in this area. A spokesman for Republican Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey said she is "committed to the parks" and that the proposal would "go through the same budget process" as other proposals. A spokesman for Attorney General Thomas Reilly, a Democrat, said he wants to "restore our parks to world class" and would "need to take a look" at the Trust for Public Lands proposal.

A spokesman for Chris Gabrieli, who was the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor in 2002, said Gabrieli deplors the lack of attention parks have received from Romney and sees them as a quality-of-life issue. The spokesman said Gabrieli has taken the proposal for increased spending "under review" and thinks the lands trust is on the right track in addressing the issue. A spokesman for Democrat Deval Patrick, who served in the Justice Department under President Clinton, said Patrick may be willing to commit to the \$10 million increase for the first year but cannot commit to more until he does a review of all state spending as governor. Grace Ross, who is running as the candidate of the Green-Rainbow Party, said she is "willing to say yes" to the \$40 million but said she would want to look into the details. A spokesman for Christy Mihos, who is running as an independent, said Mihos needed more information before making a decision on the proposal.

In the months before the primary and the final, voters should insist that the candidates give parks the priority they deserve and provide more defined reasons why they support or oppose the \$40 million goal. It would also be helpful if the campaign trail of the candidates led them to some of the state's parks so they can see for themselves what the needs are.