

Silver Sands State Park Improvement Project

Public Meeting Comments and Responses

Comments were received from the public regarding the proposed improvement project at Silver Sands State Park in Milford. The major project elements include the creation of an elevated deck structure near the shore that will support bathrooms, changing areas, a concession area and a small office for lifeguards and ENCON Police officers; a new maintenance/storage building; parking lot realignments; boardwalk improvements; wetlands enhancements, and other smaller elements.

A Public Meeting was held on September 24, 2015, in the evening at Milford City Hall regarding the proposal to make these various improvements at the Park. The meeting provided an opportunity for the public to hear a presentation about the project, review displays regarding the project elements, ask questions of staff and consultants, both in a group forum and individually with staff during a break-out session, and then to provide comments to agency staff concerning the proposed project.

Approximately 250 people attended the meeting. Many of the attendees asked questions, provided comments at the meeting or provided written comments after the meeting.

DEEP staff committed to carefully review and provide feedback on the comments received, to announce any resultant changes to the project, and to make that feedback and those conclusions available to the public. At the meeting DEEP staff was also asked to include in our analysis the concerns and issues raised during the question and answer portion of the presentation, as well as those raised during the comment period. In the months since the public meeting, DEEP Parks staff has worked with DAS Construction Services staff, DEEP Wildlife, project architects and others to refine the project, and we present that information in this document.

People raised a wide ranging set of issues regarding the proposed project and its impact on the Park, natural habitats and neighboring communities. Some individuals raised a number of issues in their comments, and many of the comments were also raised by more than one person. In an effort to not be repetitive, many of those similar comments have been grouped into a generalized statement, for which a response is provided.

The Park is beautiful the way it is, don't change it.

The Park IS beautiful, which is why it is attracting hundreds of thousands of annual visitors. The state needs to provide for the basic sanitary and safety needs of those visitors. This project will accomplish those goals, while preserving the natural beauty of the current Park.

How is this project being funded?

Funding for this project would come from 20-year General Obligation bonds, which are capital bond funds that are dedicated to the purpose of investing in state park infrastructure repairs and improvements.

In recent years, the Legislature and Governor Malloy have authorized significant capital bond funds to reinvest in our state park system. As we conclude the Centennial celebration of the first hundred years of our state parks in Connecticut, a commitment has been made to invest in high priority projects across the state to further enhance the recreational opportunities that exist at our beautiful parks. Other important and long-overdue projects are underway or concluding at a number of other state parks across the state with these funds.

Recent budget cuts to other areas of the budget should be prioritized over an expenditure at the Park

The recent budget cut proposals that are referred to are from General Fund Appropriations. Not using the available capital bond funds for this project does not make these dollars available for other appropriated activities.

Why move forward with a project that has so much opposition from local residents

Silver Sands State Park has grown increasingly popular over the years, and now welcomes an estimated 250,000 visitors a year. The public who use this Park need the basic services that this project will provide, including bathrooms, an area to change clothes, space for lifeguards and environmental conservation police staff, and a small stand for food and drink. The project will also increase the efficiency of the management of the property by allowing for on-site storage of equipment that currently needs to be transported from a significant distance and returned after each day of use.

Concern about parking impacts on East Broadway, some requesting the completion of a traffic study or the imposition of a parking sticker program for residents.

We recognize the parking congestion/resident parking conflicts that currently exist on East Broadway, particularly in the summer months. We also appreciate the concern by some that charging a parking fee at the state park will result in additional congestion as people look to avoid the fee by parking on local roads. Other communities across the state have successfully addressed similar concerns with signage and appropriate enforcement of parking rules. We have indicated our willingness to facilitate conversations with those town officials to share best practices. Others have observed that East Broadway, State Route 737, is a state road that local officials have limited authority to regulate parking and effectively enforce whatever rules are put in place. ConnDOT would be the contact to discuss collaboration on the placement of signage to restrict parking if a resident sticker parking program is desired, or to discuss possible transfer of the road to town control. DEEP has confirmed that the DOT is very willing to work with the city in this regard. Local officials should initiate these requests directly with DOT to pursue this option.

Institute a parking sticker program on East Broadway

This issue was raised by a number of commenters, and this could well be an approach to addressing the current and future traffic and parking issues that occur in this neighborhood. Resident parking sticker programs have worked successfully in many other places to address these types of concerns. However, the DEEP does not have the authority to implement or manage a resident sticker program. This is a City issue, and one that would need to be discussed among residents, the City and ConnDOT. The DOT has expressed their willingness to work with the City to address these concerns.

There is a lack of economic analysis to justify the expense of this project, the state should complete a budget analysis prior to moving forward

Several comments indicated an impression that a fiscal analysis should be undertaken to show that income from the project would be sufficient to pay back the expenses of the construction. The assumption conveyed was that state park projects (and operations) are (or should be) demonstrated to be self-supporting before they are approved. This is an inaccurate understanding of the operations of state parks. The operations of Connecticut State Parks are paid for through legislative appropriations from the General Fund of the State. Revenue collected at our parks is deposited into the General Fund, but the operations are not dependent on those revenues. Currently, the revenue returned to the state represents approximately 65% of the state's expenditures. The state of Connecticut, like almost every other state in the country, subsidizes the operations of our state parks and forest recreation areas as a service to its citizens and visitors. Funding for this project comes from a different source of state funds, namely state General Obligation Bonds, which are authorized for various purposes by the legislature and allocated for use by the agency by the Bond Commission.

There are current maintenance problems at the Park

The project will enhance staff's efforts to maintain the Park. Staff are dedicated to maintaining the grounds to the greatest extent possible, and do their best to keep the Park clean and safe for the public. They are hampered in their efforts by the lack of on-site storage and facilities to maintain the Park, and the lack of maintenance equipment storage space. Significant staff time and effort needs to be invested in transporting equipment and supplies from remote park locations (typically from State Parks in Derby or Westport) to Silver Sands. This project will include the ability to safely and securely store equipment and supplies on-site to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of staff's efforts to maintain and enhance the Park for the enjoyment of the public.

Oppose concession stand, some because of increased litter concern

We appreciate the concern about increased litter being generated from a food and drink concession at the Park, but our experience at our other facilities is that this issue can be appropriately managed. As is the case in our other locations, the concession operator will be required to provide trash and recycling containers in and around their facility and to be

responsible for trash and litter removal. Our staff will also be in and around the concession area to pick up any litter that is generated.

Oppose parking fees being imposed

We appreciate that folks would prefer not to pay to park at this or any state park.

The General Assembly in recent years, has considered legislation that would change this approach, and allow communities to determine if a parking fee is charged at a state park in their community. That legislation has not passed to become a law. Keep in mind that this fee is for parking only, and that town residents who walk in, or get dropped-off at the park, are not charged a parking fee. CT residents who are over 65, as well as disabled veterans can receive a free Charter Oak Pass, which provides for free parking at all state parks. Additionally, any CT resident and purchase a season pass for their vehicle which provides parking access to any state park for the season at a cost of \$67.

Supportive of plan generally. State's ownership of property has created a treasure at Silver Sands State Park

The State's acquisition and improvement to this land (which had previously been used as the town's landfill, sewage treatment plant and bulky waste facility over the years) has resulted in a beautiful publicly accessible beach that is convenient to residents in this densely populated area of the state. The current boardwalk that the state has created at Silver Sands and neighboring Walnut Beach is second-to-none in the state, and is enjoyed by people from throughout the region, in all seasons. Silver Sands State Park is the only large state-owned public beach between Westport and Madison (a distance of almost 50 miles). With these basic improvements, the public can better enjoy the Park that their tax dollars have supported.

Add sidewalk on Park access road into the Park

As a result of comments received, a pedestrian walkway is being added to the plan and will be installed from Meadowside Road into Silver Sands State Park.

Please leave the “porta-potti” or add a bathroom at the current location near the large parking lot

Our expectation is the visitors will come to understand that rest rooms are available at the bathhouse facility nearer to the beach and will utilize them. However, as a result of the comments we heard, we will leave an area near the main parking lot available to accommodate one or more porta-potties if they are needed in the future.

Milford should purchase passes for town residents to park at Silver Sands State Park

This is an issue for consideration by the City of Milford. If this is a program that Milford would like to undertake, DEEP will assist the City with their efforts.

Sand quality at Silver Sands State Park needs to be improved

The characteristics of beach sand vary widely across the Connecticut shore. For instance, the beach sand at Rocky Neck State Park in East Lyme is extremely fine sand, and the shore at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison is a more coarse variety. The shoreline at Silver Sands State Park is a very coarse sand with a predominance of very small stones. This is the nature of the beach in this area. While beach cleaning operations can remove litter and larger shells, the beach will remain principally a coarse sand beach.

Improve outlet of Nettleton Creek, with concern about “berm” protecting properties west of the Park

Flooding and drainage issues in the Nettleton Creek area have existed for many years. A number of maintenance and rehabilitation projects have taken place to address these issues. This project does not include elements that would address coastal flooding concerns for private properties west of the Park. Conversations regarding those concerns and potential measures to increase flooding protection to private properties should take place between the town, residents and program experts from DEEP and other regulatory agencies.

Complete a new Environmental Impact Evaluation (EIE)

The concern stated by some is that the development of this Park to the extent proposed in the original Master Plan will dramatically impact the natural resources and habitat values on the land. As has been explained at the public meeting in greater detail, we do not intend to build out the Park as outlined in the Master Plan. With this project, we propose to implement only a small portion of the initial Master Plan, with most of the work happening in currently developed or previously disturbed areas. We do not intend to redo a plan that we have stated we do not intend to implement, as that would be an inefficient use of state resources.

When this phase of improvements to the facilities at Silver Sands was initiated, well over 5 years ago, an analysis of the proposed work to be done was compared to the Master Plan and EIE that had been developed previously. The scope of work proposed in this project is a very small subset of the original Master Plan, and a number of the elements involve areas of the park that are already developed, and previously disturbed, creating no new additional impact.

What certainly has changed in the past 20 years are regulatory requirements that are often changing and developing. For instance, the bathhouse complex envisioned in this plan is an area that now requires significant elevation to accommodate the recently redefined flood zones. The building has been designed with those changed standards in mind and the elements of the plan are subjected to rigorous environmental permitting review to assure their compliance with all applicable laws, regulations and policies that will take into account current requirements and conditions. That permitting review has concluded, and after a close analysis of potential impacts of the project and possible mitigation proposals were considered, the project has received necessary permits to continue.

There is one element of the project that was not envisioned in the Master Plan and the subsequent EIE, and that is the “short-cut” boardwalk to the new bathhouse. As that is a new element, a detailed CEPA Environmental Classification evaluation was conducted by staff, with a determination that the specifics of the proposal did not require the preparation of an additional EIE, based on the ECD. This boardwalk addition is also subject to environmental review under the Structures, Dredging and Fill statutes (Sections 22a-359 through 22a-363f of the Connecticut General Statutes). As discussed above, a public hearing on this permit application was held and after close review a permit was issued to construct this boardwalk.

We do not anticipate building out Silver Sands State Park in accordance with the robust development outlined in the Master Plan, which would have included multiple additional bathhouses; extensive additional parking; multiple ballfields; an interpretive center, and additional features. In contrast to the dated Master Plan, this project will provide basic sanitation and modest services to the hundreds of thousands of visitors who currently come to the Park each year. If we were to embark on a larger or more intensive project, we agree that would require significant additional planning and evaluation, but again, we do not have plans to do that. To “redo” the larger master plan and EIE based on a plan that we have no intention to implement would be a very unwise and unnecessary use of state resources, and not one we would support.

Work cooperatively with the City to develop strategies to address concerns

The State has provided updates to city and local state officials for many years on this project. Meetings have been held in town hall with the current and previous mayors as well as the city's legislative delegation to update them on plans and to hear their concerns and suggestions. This level of local interaction, over the years, has been robust and more frequent than any other project the State Parks Division has developed. We have made every effort to seek input and suggestions from the City, and we have cooperated fully to facilitate the town's projects that have taken place within the State Park including the recent town sewer line upgrades through the Park.

Supportive of building the bathhouse structure

Having basic sanitation and changing facilities for the hundreds of thousands of annual visitors are critical needs at Silver Sands State Park, and will be included in the project.

Supportive of building the maintenance and storage building

Currently, most maintenance staff and equipment used at Silver Sands State Park is transported to Milford from either Westport or Derby. Having a maintenance and storage building on-site will greatly increase the efficiency of our available staff, and eliminate the current necessary but wasteful transportation time.

“short-cut” boardwalk is unnecessary and should be reconsidered or eliminated

In laying out these improvements, it became clear that the only previously disturbed area that could be utilized for the bathhouse complex that was near the beach was in an area that could not support additional parking. To facilitate the public reaching the changing rooms and bathroom area, the short cut boardwalk was designed to lessen the already substantial walking distances. Over many years, there will be hundreds of thousands of park visitors who will benefit from the shorter walking distance from the main parking lot. This short boardwalk extension can be accomplished in an environmentally sensitive way.

Parking should not be expanded, it is underutilized most of the year

It is true that the parking areas at the park only reach capacity on a small number of days. We have also heard from the community that some support expanding the parking available at the Park to better accommodate park visitors, and therefore eliminate the threat of cars overflowing into the surrounding neighborhood. Hearing those two concerns, we intend to formalize the parking available in the park to make sure the parking available is maximized on those busy days, and to slightly increase total parking capacity.

Overflow parking area should be left in current state to maximize attractiveness to birds

We have heard these concerns and have redesigned the project to only minimally reconfigure the overflow parking areas to achieve that goal. Furthermore, plans to pave the overflow parking area (some commenters referred to as the ‘Sparrow Lanes’) have been eliminated so that this area will principally remain natural sand and grasses.

Oppose new buildings, with some commenting as detrimental to critical wildlife habitat

The new buildings and most of the work involved in this project would occur on land that has been previously reclaimed from prior uses. We have worked closely with the DEEP’s Wildlife Division to assure that the project elements that do have some possible impact on wildlife habitat are minimized, and that additional enhancement projects are undertaken to increase the wildlife habitat value of the Park to the many wildlife species who enjoy the area.

Support Great Creek improvements

Improvements to Great Creek were not initially included in this project, but now improvements have been included in the final project design.

As background, the State Parks Division proposed a plan to mitigate the potential adverse habitat impacts of the new “short-cut” boardwalk at Silver Sands by creating new wetland habitat in the northern section of Fletcher’s Creek, just west of the current boardwalk. During the hearing on the permit for that boardwalk, concerns were raised about the compensatory value of the proposed wetland creation in that area. Additional discussions with the Wildlife Division have resulted in a revised mitigation plan that would shift the proposed habitat

enhancement slightly to the east, in nearby Great Creek at Silver Sands State Park. The Wildlife Division has determined that habitat restoration and enhancement in the Great Creek area would be of better utility, as the tidal creeks and pannes with the marsh provide significant habitat for waterbirds and other wildlife with a minimum of human disturbance.

A mitigation plan will be implemented in the Great Creek that has three elements. The first element is the creation of 5 new pools in the wetland to enhance habitat for foraging wildlife. The pools would be created in the areas delineated by the 5 white circles on the attached map. The second element of the mitigation plan would be the restoration or creation of approximately 2400 feet of tidal channel, which would be constructed to further enhance waterbird habitat in the Great Creek system. The proposed tidal creek creation/restoration would occur as depicted by the yellow lines on the attached map. The third element of the plan would be further control the Phragmites throughout the Park. This would include managing the Phragmites through a 3-successive-year herbiciding and mowing regime in an area of approximately 80 acres across Great Creek, Fletcher Creek, and Nettleton Creek systems throughout the Silver Sands State Park.

Don't expand fishermens' parking area

We do not plan to expand the fishermens' parking area, but to better delineate the spaces and the ability for emergency traffic to flow through the area when the gate is open for fire or police access or during flooding or other emergency events.

Concern regarding impacts to piping plover

The project will provide protection to the piping plover that might nest on the beaches and is addressed in the seasonal work closure period between March 15th and September 1st.

Traffic flow on Route 1 between I-95, exit 35 and the Park and pedestrian/ bike access from Meadowside into the park

Traffic flow and regulation along Route 1 is principally a ConnDOT issue. As a general policy, DOT awaits a request from a municipality in order to initiate changes in signage and signalization on state roads, as a means of ensuring community support prior to engaging in said changes. DOT has assured DEEP that they are willing and able to discuss any proposed changes in this corridor through their normal processes.

As additional background: DOT conducted traffic counts in 2009 and 2012 along East Broadway, Meadowside Road and the intersection of Route 1 (Boston Post Road) and Route 162 Bridgeport Avenue show traffic counts stable or declining for the period. A shift in traffic patterns has occurred along the east and west side of Meadowside between Pumpkin Delight Road and Robert Treat Parkway Avenue, which may be attributable to the location of the Meadowside Elementary School, whose enrollment and teaching staff has increased over the period.

To pursue these, or any other changes to state roads in the city, the Mayor of Milford should initiate a request to: Charles S. Harlow, PE, Division Chief-Traffic Engineering, Connecticut Department of Transportation, (860) 594-2788, Charles.Harlow@ct.gov

Concerns about pedestrian and bicycle access into the park from Meadowside Lane will be addressed in the final project. The plans are being amended to include a bike/pedestrian lane along the main road into the park.

Concern about process, and plans for this project being far along before the public had a chance to comment. Concern that the project is “locked-in” and there will not be a genuine willingness to hear concerns or make changes.

It is a difficult balance to find exactly the right time to hear public comments on a project of this nature. We want the project's design to be sufficiently advanced to have a relatively clear picture of the proposed project elements, location and impacts for the public to react to. On the other hand we don't want the specifics of the project to be so prescribed as to not allow changes and alterations based on comments received. At the public information session (and the public hearing on the permit application) the design was at this stage.

A number of project elements, as outlined here, were altered, added or removed as a result of comments heard from the public at the two sessions, and subsequent written comments we received.

Oppose clothes changing areas in bathhouse complex as unnecessary

We appreciate that people will have differing opinions as to what elements of the projects are necessary or not, depending on how they may use the facility. Having changing rooms for visitors will provide a basic amenity and will eliminate the current problematic alternatives, such as people changing in their cars, or in the parking lot.

Concern about high cost of project (believes (incorrectly) the plan is slated to cost \$25M)

Project cost is an estimated \$6-7 million, at this point. Now that project details are finalized and all permits are in place, the project will be competitively bid through the Department of Administrative Services, to determine actual cost in the marketplace, and the lowest bid from a responsible bidder will be selected.

Create a wall to prohibit people from accessing the Park from East Broadway

We know that residents and visitors in the East Broadway neighborhood frequently visit the State Park, and would not envision creating a wall to keep people from entering or exiting the Park from this area. If the City of Milford would request that we consider such a wall, as a mechanism to address parking issues on East Broadway, we certainly would participate in a dialogue on the topic.

Support additional parking to alleviate any parking issues outside the Park

This project will incorporate a slight increase in the number of parking spaces, but will also better formalize the existing spaces so that they are more fully utilized on busy days.

Believes one ticket-booth lane will cause a back-up onto local streets on busy days

The plans for this project originally envisioned one ticket booth lane, with infrastructure to support adding a second lane if we later determined it was needed. Initial drawings of the project presented one lane. Later in the planning, and in the drawings available at the public meeting, we presented the project with two lanes. We do plan to build the project with two lanes to address this concern.

Doesn't support changes. Some indicating the changes are “nice to have” not “need to have”

We appreciate that some do not support any changes or improvements to the Park, or do not see some elements as necessary. We believe that the bathrooms, changing rooms, concession stand, small offices for ENCON Police and Lifeguards, as well as the parking lot and traffic flow improvements, along with the maintenance building are necessary to support the public's use of the park, and allow our staff to supervise and maintain the park in an efficient manner.

Take wildlife concerns into account, consult with DEEP Wildlife Division

The Department's Wildlife Division has been consulted throughout this project, for several years. The final project design, as well as the mitigation plan that is part of the permitting of the project was created with the support and collaboration of the Wildlife Division.

It's a conflict of Interest for DEEP to regulate a project proposed by another division of the agency. This comment apparently referencing the Structure, Dredging and Fill Permit application required from the DEEP's Office of Long Island Sound Programs.

Professional staff throughout the DEEP's permitting divisions, as well as other state and federal agencies, have regulatory and permitting oversight over state agency projects as a routine part of their job. They bring the same dedication and professionalism to their work and responsibilities regardless of who the applicant may be on a specific project.

The new buildings at the park should be environmentally designed with some suggesting that the new buildings should be designed to meet the standard for LEED certification

All fixtures and elements of the building will utilize the most energy efficient and resources conservation minded products available. Seasonal use buildings do not typically fall within LEED certification parameters.

Summary: Changes to the project design as a result of comments, suggestions and additional discussion:

Eliminate the reconfigured paved parking to the west of the paved parking lot and limit that to regrading to provide more positive drainage to the existing swales, and preserving the wildlife habitat value of that area.

Provide a bike/ pedestrian lane from Meadowside Drive to the parking lots.

Leave provision for bathroom or portable toilet near the existing large parking lot.

Change the location and expand the scope of the wetland habitat enhancement project from Fletcher's Creek to the nearby and larger Great Creek.