

CONNECTICUT STATE PARKS PARTNERSHIPS IN PARKS INITIATIVE REQUEST FOR INFORMATION (RFI)

Connecticut's State Parks are a public treasure, contributing to the exceptional quality of life for Connecticut residents and visitors and a thriving outdoor recreation economy. The Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP, or the Department) is responsible for managing 110 Connecticut State Park (State Parks).

Demand for outdoor recreation has spiked since the pandemic, with State Park visitation increasing from just under 10 million in 2019 to an estimated 17 million in 2022. Connecticut's outdoor recreation economy has grown significantly over the past two years and is the second largest in New England, supporting almost 46,000 jobs. This increase in public demand for outdoor recreation at State Parks coincides with a historic investment in State Park facilities. Since 2022 Governor Lamont and the Legislature have committed \$80M in total for capital investments as part of the [Restore CT State Parks](#) initiative.

I. VISION

Against this backdrop of a growing outdoor economy, and a significant increase in both park visitation and demand for outdoor recreation, DEEP is releasing a Request for Information (RFI) to seek information from the public and strategic partners – businesses, non-profits, and other interested stakeholders.¹ This RFI will inform steps DEEP can take to pursue partnerships with the private sector that elevate visitors' outdoor recreation experiences in State Parks, enhance tourism destinations, and provide equitable access to the outdoors.

¹ Relevant authorities for this RFI include but are not limited to Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) Sections 4-8, 22a-5, 22a-6, 22a-26, 22a-27t, 22a-27w, 22a-324; 23-4, 23-10b, 23-11, 23-15b, 23-15c, 23-15e, 23-20, 23-25, 23-26, 26-3, 26-3b; and Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies (RCSA), [§§ 23-4-1 to 23-4-35](#).

II. GOALS & CONSIDERATIONS

Through this RFI and subsequent steps, DEEP hopes to achieve several goals:

- **Elevate Outdoor Recreation & Visitor Experience:** DEEP is interested in exploring partnerships to provide additional services to elevate the public's experience in Connecticut State Parks. These services could include locally sourced farmers' markets, paddle, bike or other outdoor recreation equipment rentals, guided experiences, "glamping" opportunities, cross country or downhill ski experiences, marinas, electric boat shares, and other outdoor recreation and cultural experiences.
- **Expand Tourism Destinations:** State Parks are one of Connecticut's largest tourism attractions, and DEEP seeks to build on our success through partnerships that expand sustainable tourism opportunities and support local economic development.
- **Provide Equitable & Sustainable Access to the Outdoors:** DEEP seeks partnerships that support universal, adaptive, and ADA-compliant access to outdoor recreation, [such as this Georgia State Parks partnership providing all-terrain wheelchairs](#). Many forms of outdoor recreation also require specific skills, equipment, or gear whose cost or unfamiliarity can be a barrier to participation. DEEP seeks partnerships that provide all visitors with equitable opportunities to participate in outdoor recreation experiences through guided experiences, equipment rental or share programs, and education. DEEP also seeks partnerships resulting in sustainable, greener operations in State Parks.

In addition to these goals, DEEP has several key considerations in mind when reviewing RFI submissions:

- DEEP is undertaking this initiative to improve the public's outdoor recreation experience and provide equitable access in State Parks, and therefore will not consider partnerships that "privatize" or restrict public access to a state park.
- DEEP is interested in partnerships that are consistent with our values of promoting outdoor recreation and protecting our natural resources. In some cases, outdoor recreation experiences sought out by park visitors impact the sensitive natural environments in our parks. Partnerships may be able to meet visitor demand for those experiences in ways that help to manage and mitigate those impacts. For example, services like guided tubing and canoe rentals can provide convenient, safe river access while reducing erosion of sensitive riparian zones and litter caused by unmanaged visitation.

- As DEEP continues to seek ways to elevate the outdoor recreation experience within limited state resources, DEEP will not encourage partnerships that create – directly or indirectly – additional DEEP expenses or operational responsibilities. Instead, DEEP encourages concepts for revenue-sharing partnerships that result in financial benefit to the State including State Park capital infrastructure investments and/or support to the [Passport to Parks](#) account, which funds park operations. (DEEP will consider revenue neutral models that may be more appropriate for partnerships focused on ADA or adaptive access.)

III. EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF PARTNERSHIPS DEEP IS OPEN TO CONSIDERING

DEEP invites businesses, non-profits, and individuals to submit concepts for outdoor recreation services and experiences they would be interested in providing in Connecticut State Parks. This RFI is intentionally broad to encourage innovative, creative concepts within any of the 110 State Parks across Connecticut. (For more information on specific state parks, go to the [State Park Finder website](#).) DEEP has provided a list of example concepts below to spur creativity and to help guide applicants toward the types of partnerships concepts to submit.

This RFI is not intended to replace existing partnerships, but rather to solicit concepts for new or expanded partnerships involving Connecticut State Parks. Entities currently in partnership with DEEP will continue to operate in accordance with their individual agreements for the term of those agreements and need not respond to this RFI to maintain partnerships already in place.

The following list is not comprehensive, nor does it represent DEEP's intention to implement the concepts below, but instead is designed as a guide to help potential respondents understand examples of outdoor recreation partnerships that may align with the goals and considerations of the RFI.

Tourism Destinations

- Outdoor Music Events or Venues
- Breweries/Distilleries/Wineries
- Restaurants/Eateries
- Cross-Country Ski Areas
- Event Coordination (weddings, etc.)
- Glamping or Other Short-Term Lodging

Elevate Outdoor Recreation & Visitor Experience

- Kayak/Canoe Rentals
- Farmers' Markets in State Park or Campground
- Disk Golf
- Equestrian Experiences

- Bike or E-bike rentals (on bike paths where permitted)
- Gift & Gear Shops (using existing structures)
- Guided Outdoor Experiences
- Outdoor Gear Rental, Loan, or Share Programs (fishing, camping, etc.)
- Paddling Tours
- River Tubing or Rafting
- Guided Rock Climbing
- Bird Watching & Viewing
- Managed & Enhanced Trail Networks (cross-country ski, mountain bike, etc.)
- Outdoor Education/Nature Centers
- PFD/Life Jacket Loaner Programs
- Events such as Historic Reenactments, Interpretation, and Public History
- Food Trucks

Provide Equitable & Sustainable Access to the Outdoors

- ADA and/or Adaptive Sports or Recreation (paddling, biking, etc.)
- All-Terrain Powered Wheelchairs (e.g., [this partnership in Georgia State Parks](#))
- Programs or Experiences from Equity Focused Organizations such as:
 - Outdoor Afro
 - Latino Outdoors
 - Becoming An Outdoors Woman
 - Hike it Baby
 - Veteran's groups
- Parking Management/Fee Collection for Out-of-State Parking
- Electric Car or Boat Charging Stations

IV. BOUNDARIES FOR PARTNERSHIPS

While DEEP is encouraging innovative concepts, the following boundaries are designed to prevent respondents from submitting concepts that are clearly outside the scope of consideration. Various restrictions also govern what kinds of projects can be implemented in State Parks.

DEEP will not consider partnerships for general recreational sports amenities or facilities such as basketball courts, golf courses, pickle ball or tennis courts, soccer fields, etc. that are incompatible with the type of outdoor recreation opportunities provided at State Parks.

DEEP is not seeking proposals in this RFI to add new properties to the State Park system. This RFI is for investment in existing parks.

All proposed uses of State property resulting from this RFI will be expected to comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations. These could include but are not limited to the Connecticut Environmental Policy Act and the Department's regulatory standards.

For example, under Connecticut state law, the operation of food concessions (including soda and beverage machines) in State Parks are required to be offered first to vendors with sight impairments who are clients of the Department of Aging and Disability Services and currently provide food and beverage concessions at fixed building locations at Hammonasset Beach and Rocky Neck State Parks. If the Department of Aging and Disability Services does not have a vendor interested in providing these services at a specific park, they "waive" that statutory right and the concession opportunity is offered through a competitive solicitation process.

Also for example, alcoholic beverages currently are [prohibited](#) in 20 State Parks as well as on state beaches and boardwalks. Please refer to the Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies 23-4-1 through 23-4-5 for other uses that are normally restricted or prohibited in State Parks.

V. SPECIFIC PARK LOCATIONS & FACILITIES

DEEP is accepting submission of partnership concepts involving all existing State Parks. However, DEEP is highlighting the following facilities – all of which are located in parks that host weddings and events – and is providing additional information to inform concepts that meet the goals and considerations of the RFI. Detailed information and photos of each facility listed below will be posted on the DEEP website along with this RFI. Since these types of partnerships would involve repeated occupation of DEEP buildings, they would require a subsequent, competitive RFP process.

- [Rocky Neck State Park](#) – Ellie Mitchell Pavilion: DEEP seeks open ended partnership concepts which could include management and possible expansion of the existing wedding/event function, restaurant, historic inn or lodge, or other food, beverage, and hospitality concepts that are compatible with the park setting and historic status of the building.
- [Harkness Memorial State Park](#)
 - Eolia Mansion: DEEP seeks concepts which could include the management and possible expansion of the successful and popular wedding and event services provided at the mansion.
 - Carriage House: DEEP seeks open ended concepts. A potential partnership could support the ongoing wedding service provided in the Eolia Mansion.

- [Gillette Castle State Park](#):
 - Concession Building: DEEP seeks open ended concepts that meet the goals of the RFI. The Carriage house is located adjacent to the castle and most recently used to provide food and beverage services.
 - Osaki House: Located next to the Connecticut River and the historic [Chester/Hadlyme Ferry](#). DEEP seeks open-ended concepts that meet the goals of the RFI.

If organizations are interested in submitting partnerships concepts involving DEEP buildings that are not listed here, DEEP encourages them to ask or submit questions to check alignment with agency priorities; see section titled “Submission Process, Public Posting & Due Dates.”

VI. EXAMPLES OF CURRENT PARTNERSHIPS

Connecticut State Parks currently partners with the following organizations:

- Canoe & Kayak Rentals with [Clarke Outdoors](#) at [Lake Waramaug State Park](#) and [Burr Pond State Park](#)
- [Essex Steam Train](#) at [Connecticut Valley Railroad State Park](#)
- [Farmington River Tubing](#) at [Satan’s Kingdom State Park](#)
- [Mohawk Mountain Ski Area](#) at Mohawk Mountain State Park
- [Farm River Marina](#) at Farm River State Park
- Food & beverage Concessions Statewide

VII. PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURES

Under applicable state law and regulations, there are three common ways to formalize a partnership within Connecticut State Parks: special use licenses, concession agreements, and leases. These structures differ based on the level of complexity, timeframes, revenue, and proposed usage. Additionally, DEEP may direct partnership concepts towards an agreement structure that may be best suited to the type of partnership proposed.

Concession Agreements generally use State Park facilities or property to provide services to the public in or at a State-owned facility, usually for a one-to-five-year timeframe (with a potential option to renew for a second term). They generally are awarded via a competitive RFP process. An example is [Farmington River Tubing](#) and most of DEEP’s food/beverage concessions.

Long-term leases generally are used to provide services to the public that involve long-term use of State facilities, major capital investments, or significant modification to State. They generally are awarded via a competitive RFP process.

Special Use Licenses (SULs) generally are used for low impact events or pilot partnerships that do not exceed one year and do not involve modifications or repeated occupation of State

facilities. They are analyzed and awarded by DEEP through an internal application review process to ensure alignment with agency goals and facility operations.

VIII. REVIEW PROCESS

DEEP will convene an internal review team of DEEP staff to review all concepts submitted into this RFI. Respondents may be invited to meet with DEEP staff for discussions to further understand or refine the concept that was submitted.

Respondents are required to submit non-confidential summaries of their concepts, which will be posted on the DEEP website after the submission deadline.

As noted above, DEEP establishes partnerships requiring concession agreements and long-term leases through a competitive RFP process. DEEP is conducting this RFI to solicit concepts for partnership concepts which may inform DEEP's development of one or more subsequent RFPs to competitively solicit and enter such partnerships. Submitting a concept to this RFI helps DEEP identify the types of partnerships that partners may be interested in pursuing and helps DEEP design potential subsequent RFPs. This could include, for example, RFPs for partnerships focused on specific Park facilities or specific types of services and amenities, or a broad RFP for all types of partnerships involving all State Park facilities. All RFPs resulting from this RFI will be released in draft for public review and comment before being issued in final version for bid submissions. This will provide both the public and bidders with an opportunity to provide feedback on the objectives, scope, terms, evaluation criteria, selection process, and other aspects of any RFP. Any future RFP will require a separate submission apart from any materials that may have been submitted through this RFI.

If appropriate per the relevant regulatory requirements/criteria, low impact partnership concepts submitted to the RFI will be directed to DEEP's regular Special Use License program for further review.

DEEP currently expects to review RFI concepts in Summer 2024, with the release of subsequent draft RFP(s) anticipated in Fall of 2024.

IX. INFORMATIONAL WEBINAR

DEEP will host an Informational Webinar for businesses, organizations, and individuals considering submitting a response to the RFI as well as members of the public who may be interested in providing further comment. DEEP representatives will be available to answer questions about the information provided in the RFI including the submission and review process.

The webinar will be Tuesday, February 6, 2024, 10:00 - 11:00 am. Please register in advance at https://ctdeep.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_HxvodOMQT9a5RLTpj8_tTA. DEEP will post a recording of the meeting to its website.

X. SUBMISSION PROCESS, PUBLIC POSTING & DUE DATES

Respondents should submit **all information listed in the template in Appendix A** as well as additional materials they think would be helpful. **Submit via e-mail by the due dates below to deep.partnershipsinparks@ct.gov.**

1. **Tuesday, April 30, 2024, 11:59 PM EST: All concepts for 2025 and beyond.**

DEEP will review concepts submitted into this RFI on a rolling basis as concepts are received. DEEP requests that all concepts be submitted no later than Tuesday, April 30, 2024, at 11:59 PM EST.

2. **Friday, March 1, 2024, 11:59 PM EST: Low Impact Concepts for 2024.**

As noted in section VII. Partnership Structures, DEEP anticipates some low impact partnership concepts submitted into this RFI may be established through Special Use Licenses if they meet the relevant criteria and regulatory requirements. Respondents submitting a low impact partnership concept to be implemented in 2024 should submit these concepts to the RFI as soon as possible and no later than Friday, March 1, 2024, at 11:59 PM EST, so DEEP can review appropriate concepts through the regular Special Use License program.

DEEP reserves the right to accept submissions after the submission deadline but cannot guarantee that late submissions will be reviewed.

For accessibility, translation needs, requests for an exception for paper submission, or other questions, please contact Christopher Shepard at deep.partnershipsinparks@ct.gov or 860-424-3005 by Tuesday, April 16, 2024, 5:00 PM EST.

DEEP values the importance of transparent, public communication around any initiative that involves Connecticut State Parks and will post a summary of concept submissions on our website after the RFI is completed.

XI. CONFIDENTIALITY

If a respondent wishes to submit commercially sensitive or financial information to the Department that is of a confidential nature, please recognize that the Connecticut Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) governs the public's access to information. This law generally requires the disclosure of documents in the State's possession upon request of any citizen unless the documents are specifically exempt from disclosure.

All information submitted to DEEP will be considered a public record unless a respondent requests confidential treatment of materials submitted pursuant to the procedure below. If a respondent believes portions of the information it submits are exempt from FOIA disclosure, the respondent must submit:

- One complete response to this RFI, available upon public request with all claimed confidential material redacted and clearly labeled PUBLIC, and
- One complete, unredacted response to this RFI for DEEP's internal review, clearly labeled CONFIDENTIAL on each page.

Respondents also must indicate which FOIA exemption may be applicable to the specific information claimed confidential. A full list of FOIA exemptions can be found at [CGS § 1-210](#).

With your reasonable justification for confidentiality as described herein, the Department is better equipped to safeguard your confidential information should it become the subject of a Connecticut FOIA inquiry.

XII. GENERAL TERMS, CONDITIONS & LIMITATIONS

The issuance of this RFI and the submission of a response by any respondent, or the acceptance of such response by DEEP, does not obligate DEEP or the State of Connecticut in any manner. DEEP reserves the right (i) to amend, modify, or withdraw this RFI, (ii) to revise any requirements of this RFI, (iii) to require supplemental statements or information from any firm, (iv) to accept or reject any or all responses, (v) to extend the deadline for submission of responses, (vi) to negotiate or hold discussions with any respondent and to waive defects and allow corrections of deficient responses, and (vii) to cancel this RFI, in whole or in part, if DEEP deems it in its best interest to do so. DEEP may exercise these rights at any time without notice and without liability to any proposing firm or any other party for their expenses incurred in the preparation of the responses hereto or otherwise. Responses to this RFI will be prepared at the sole cost and expense of the proposing individuals.

All RFI responses submitted by respondents will become the property of the State of Connecticut. DEEP shall be entitled to retain and use for the project without compensation to any respondent any information submitted, including, but not limited to, any concept, element, or idea (including financial or ownership structures) disclosed in or evident in the submission or meetings or interviews with respondents. DEEP believes that the information in this RFI is accurate, but DEEP, the State of Connecticut and their officers, agents, and employees make no representations or warranties to such accuracy and assume no responsibility for errors and omissions contained herein.

DEEP shall be the sole decision maker of whether a response complies with the requirements of this RFI and whether responses have merit. Responding to this RFI will not enhance a person's or entity's chances of collaborating with DEEP in future State Park initiatives. Similarly, not responding to this RFI will not be a detriment to any person or entity when responding to future competitive procurement opportunities. Nothing contained in this RFI shall limit DEEP in its selection of individuals to be invited to respond to future development and other solicitations for this project or future projects, nor limit DEP's discretion in any way in formulating and adopting a development plan for the State Park(s). Submission of a response to this RFI by any respondent constitutes respondent's permission and consent to inquiries by DEEP concerning the respondent and their ability to participate in the development project, including checking references, credit checks, and similar investigations.

This is an RFI and not a competitive RFP. If, upon consideration by DEEP, a project or multiple projects are found of interest, the agency may issue a formal RFP in accordance with State statutes and guidelines to institute any bidding processes as may be necessary. Any resulting agreements with the State will be subject to the relevant and applicable State approval processes.

It is the policy of DEEP and the State of Connecticut to comply with all federal, state, and local laws, policies, orders, rules, and regulations which prohibit unlawful discrimination because of

race, creed, color, national origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, or marital status. Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprises (M/WBEs) are encouraged to respond to this RFI.

**APPENDIX A:
REQUEST FOR INFORMATION SUBMISSION TEMPLATE**

Please use the following template as you respond to the Request for Information. Attaching additional information such as visual, graphic, and/or data presentations using PowerPoint or Excel also is encouraged.

Email completed template, which should not exceed **five (5) single-spaced pages** and attachments to deep.partnershipsinparks@ct.gov, with the subject line "Parks RFI Submission – *Insert Concept Title, State Park, Desired Year for Implementation.*" For example, "Parks RFI Submission – Kayak Rental Service, Machimoodus State Park, 2024."

Partnership concepts submissions 2024 should be low impact and appropriate for DEEP's ongoing Special Use License program. These concepts need to be submitted by Friday, March 1, 2024, 11:59 PM EST.

Partnership concepts for 2025 and beyond need to be submitted by Tuesday, April 30, 2024, 11:59 PM EST.

See RFI section IX. Submission Process, Public Posting & Due Dates for details.

Title:

Partnership Concept Title, State Park/Facility, Desired Year of Implementation

1. Overview

Provide a concise narrative describing conceptual ideas for new or expanded outdoor recreational opportunity/venture and include the specific park(s)/facilities to be utilized.

2. Recreation Services & Goals

Highlight the public use and benefit to be derived from the recreational services in alignment with one or more of the goals of the RFI:

- Elevate Outdoor Recreation & Visitor Experience
- Expand Tourism Destinations
- Provide Equitable & Sustainable Access to Outdoor Recreation

When describing the public use and benefit, please also make sure to define the *need* for this particular service, e.g., any evidence of demand for this service, similar models that have been successful in other locations, etc.

3. Operations & Staffing

Describe the specific area required to provide the proposed services, e.g.:

- Specific location within the park/facility
- Length and width including the overall square footage (if applicable)
- Equipment storage if applicable

Clearly describe the timeframe for when services would be offered including season, days of the week, and hours of operation and an approximate schedule/timeline that would be needed for the services to be offered to the public.

4. Infrastructure & Technology

Describe any infrastructure investments needed to support operations (utilization of existing structures or temporary structures encouraged over installing new buildings).

Describe any technology changes or investments needed to support operations.

Indicate how your organization is prepared to make relevant infrastructure investments.

5. Marketing

Describe how services will be marketed and communicated to the public.

6. Financial

Include details regarding proposed pricing, estimated operating costs, and/or financial models. DEEP understands that cost estimates may be general in nature or estimates, but any cost data that is included will be appreciated.

Include information regarding potential revenue to the State.

7. Sustainability

Describe how operations will minimize carbon footprint, integrate sustainability, and promote conservation of Connecticut's public lands and natural resources.

8. Summary (to be posted on DEEP website following final due date)

Provide a non-confidential summary of less than 200 words that describes the proposed concept. This summary will be posted on the DEEP website.