

Thursday, March 2, 2006

Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Senate Majority Leader David J. Brightbill, 48th District, questioned the dramatic cuts in the State Parks' budget from pre-2003 funding levels during the budget hearing with Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Secretary Michael DiBerardinis.

Senator Brightbill pointed out that the Rendell Administration often touts its dedication to the environment and the Senator expressed his hope that the Administration would fully fund the Commonwealth's State Parks to demonstrate its commitment to these valuable natural resources.

Senator Joseph Scarnati, 25th District, also voiced his support for the additional \$2 million proposed for State Parks in this year's budget and urged the Department to restore some of the cuts in services that have been made in response to budget cuts over the past three years.

Several members of the Senate Appropriations Committee praised the work of not-for-profit groups in improving and maintaining the Commonwealth's State Parks. Senator Roger Madigan, 23rd District, pointed out the positive work done by not-for-profit groups to improve Salt Spring State Park in his district. Senator Ted Erickson, 26th District, suggested working closer with not-for-profit groups with facilities in the Commonwealth's State Parks, noting the success of such programs in his district.

Senator Stewart Greenleaf, 12th District, urged the Department to encourage active use of State Park lands for recreational purposes. Senator Mike Waugh, 28th District, also questioned the Department's role in the transfer of leased campsites on state land and the campsite leasing program's affect on the Department's budget. Secretary DiBerardinis said that the program did not bring in much revenue, but was not a burden on the budget.

Senator John Rafferty, 44th District, said that his office received complaints about the care at Evansburg State Park and asked Secretary DiBerardinis to take a closer look at the issue. Senator Rafferty and Senator Erickson also expressed concerns about the growing deer population in State Parks.

Senator Mary Jo White, 21st District, questioned the Department's management of oil and gas leases on Commonwealth-owned land, and Secretary DiBerardinis said that no decision has been made on a recommendation to terminate these leases. Senator White also questioned the proposed reduction in the percentage of the realty transfer tax that is appropriated to Key93, and Secretary DiBerardinis said that the program would not actually experience a reduction in funding and pledged to provide a more extensive explanation of Key93 funding at a later date.

Senator White also discussed the restoration of services cut at State Parks, asking Secretary DiBerardinis when his Department expects those services to be back to the level they were at in 2002.