

**PennFuture * Sierra Club * Natural Resources Defense Council
Clean Water Action * PennEnvironment * Pennsylvania Forest Coalition
Conservation Voters of Pennsylvania**

June 23, 2016

Re: Opposition to House Bill 2013

Dear Representative:

The undersigned members of the environmental and conservation community write to express our strong opposition to House Bill 2013, which you may be asked to vote upon in the near future.

The state park system is one of Pennsylvania's most defining and valued characteristics. They are a source of unmatched natural and scenic beauty, tourism, outdoor education, and economic growth. For every \$1 invested in our parks, they've historically returned over \$12 in local benefits. Most importantly, the state parks deliver this rate of return to communities while providing affordable access to the parks for all, no matter income level, and with a deep and abiding culture of protecting nature and wildlife. As a result, Pennsylvania's state parks have received the National Gold Medal For Excellence in Park and Recreation Management.

It's with these benefits in mind that we question the efficacy of House Bill 2013 and request your opposition, whether the bill is amended or not. Instead, we call on the General Assembly to address the agency's budget shortfalls for maintain existing infrastructure and assets before advancing legislation to force new infrastructure on our state parks.

House Bill 2013

House Bill 2013 would establish a Public-Private Partnership Board (P3 Board) to review and approve recreational projects, such as golf courses, water parks, office buildings, and hotels, proposed by private sector entities for construction on state park lands. This would duplicate existing Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) authority and raise grave concerns about how our state park system should be managed, including:

- **Building new projects the public isn't asking for.** The Pennsylvania Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan for 2014-2019 included participation from 10,000 members of the public, and when asked what they value most in their recreational and natural amenities, 90 percent of respondents said trails, natural areas, and waterways. Since the state parks are our shared public lands, we should be supporting improvements in areas the public has articulated finding value.
- **Shifting park management from DCNR professionals to legislative appointees.** While DCNR would have a single member on the P3 Board, it would be greatly overshadowed by a two-thirds majority of legislative appointees that have been offered little guidance by House Bill 2013 on how to evaluate proposed projects.

- **Increasing legislative pressure to advance politically motivated projects.** DCNR would more often than not be forced to accept the P3 Board's recommendations for projects. The P3 Board would provide the legislature a useful tool to strong arm DCNR to advance pet projects, even if they don't fit within the agencies overall goals and priorities.
- **Reducing public input on state park project development.** House Bill 2013 does not provide for public comment during the P3 Board process, meaning private development decisions for our state parks would be made outside of established professional guidelines and with no public input.

Amendment A08849 to House Bill 2013

Rep. Ellis, the chief sponsor of House Bill 2013, has filed Amendment A08849 that would replace the P3 Board with a pilot project. The Amendment calls on DCNR to hire a consultant to assess Pennsylvania's state park assets and recommend new recreational, lodging, and ancillary projects that would benefit the public and advance DCNR's mission.

We recognize that Amendment A08849 is an improvement to the original bill language by removing the P3 Board. However, DCNR already has the authority to enter into public private partnerships and does not need this bill or a consultant to continue to do so – in fact, there are more than 150 public-private partnerships in state parks in the form of concessions and other facilities that serve park users. Funds invested toward state parks should be used to help address the backlog of capital improvement projects necessary to maintain and improve visitor experience rather than on private consultants to conduct a pilot study on an area over which DCNR has had authority for decades.

DCNRs Budget Shortfall is the Real Issue

House Bill 2013 raises chief concerns around DCNRs state budget. The General Assembly shifted DCNRs budget to rely on the Oil and Gas Lease Fund, but has consistently diverted those funds away from conservation and our parks. As a result, DCNR continues to accrue a backlog of projects to maintain existing facilities and assets. Addressing this backlog is a necessary step that requires an increase in DCNRs budget. Forcing DCNRs attention and limited budget on new recreational assets only deepens the existing backlog and could exacerbate it more by placing new pressure on its budget to hire consultants or staff the proposed P3 Board.

It's critical that the General Assembly take up the important issue of improving DCNRs budget so that existing infrastructure can be maintained. **In addition to opposition on House Bill 2013, whether amended or not, we call on the General Assembly to begin debating increasing DCNRs budget so that our state parks are maintained and modernized.**

Sincerely,

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