Reviving Neglected State Parks

Continued Upkeep Critical To Success

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EAST HADDAM — Stone by stone, Gillette Castle is being put back together again.

Workers are rebuilding its parapets, balconies and unusual stone awnings. Their attention will soon be turned to the castle’s equally rich interior, filled with luxurious woodwork and unique decor.

From its perch above the Connecticut River, actor William Gillette’s troubled fieldstone palace-turned-state park is about midway through a two-year, $9 million overhaul that should return it to its place as one of the state’s premier tourist destinations.

And while the Gillette project is enormous, it’s just part of a 12-year parks’ improvement program that is hitting its stride as thousands of nature lovers prepare for the upcoming season. The plan runs through 2010 and seeks to resurrect a park system so tattered by neglect and deferred maintenance that it had become an embarrassment for many.

When Gov. John G. Rowland announced in 1997 that the state would bond $114 million to rebuild a public recreational system that includes 93 parks and 31 forests, few questioned the need. Nearly three years later, about $33 million of that money has been authorized by the State Bond Commission and some believe the park system is on the rebound. Under the state’s “2010 Plan,” 53 of its parks and several state forests will receive at least some money.

While many applaud the investments, others are cautious, waiting to see if the state completes the promised work and continues to care for its park system after the current repair binge is over.

“We need to be working hard and building the groundswell so this isn’t a flash in the pan. We know that we are going to have to stay on our toes,” said Diana McMasters, vice president of Friends of Connecticut State Parks, an advocacy group. “But I think things have turned around. The system had hit bottom. We’ve gotten a shot in the arm.”

Projects range from large undertakings to relatively minor gestures. The state plans to lavish some $10 million on Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison — consistently one of the state’s most popular summer destinations — while it will spend $380,000 to shore up the ramparts at Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park in Groton.

In most cases, summer visitors to state parks should encounter only minor inconveniences. At Gillette Castle, however, the building remains closed to visitors until next year.

Hammonasset’s park supervisor, Roger Kinderman, lived through the lean years and knows the hardships. His park offers miles of beachfront, camping and one of the premier birdwatching spots in Connecticut. It’s a beautiful spot, and it needs to be cared for, he said. That requires money.

“It’s finally been addressed,” he said. “It’s the best news we’ve heard. I think there should really be some nice services. It’s the state’s way a giving something back to its citizens.”

Additional park staff have also been hired — though levels are still far below what they used to be. The parks system now has about 118 employees, an increase of 26 staff over the past few years, said Pamela Adams, director of state parks for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

During the mid 1980s, there were 258 parks
Condon
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With animosity as a motivator, the two teams banged away at each other, and the ref didn’t call it close- ly. “We were playing so hard we didn’t even know what the score was,” said Kieval.

Klotz’ set-shot was finding the bottom of the net and time again. Kieval got a lot of assists. “I always passed to Red; he signed the paychecks every week.”

“I was making shots and stealing the ball. The game was very competi-tive, so competitive they decided to keep it going,” Klotz said.

The crowd was dumbfounded, waiting for the show that never took place. The Reds had no champa-gne — it would have gone sour between wins — so they dumped or-
ange soda on Klotz’s sweaty noggin. Globetrotters owner Abe Saperstein didn’t take it well. “He came into our locker room to congratu-late,” Kieval said.

Panel Approves ‘Father Lysz Law’

The state legislature’s judiciary committee on Friday unanimously approved a bill aimed at requiring mentally ill people who are prone to violence to take prescribed medica-tions.

The so-called ‘Father Lysz Law’ is now headed to the appro-priations committee.

‘I’m still working on some minor adjust-ments, but the more people I talk to, the more people who support it the way it is,” said state Rep. Roger Michele, D-Bristol.

Michele has championed the bill, named after the slain pastor at St. Matthew’s Church in the Forest-ville section of Bristol. The Rev. Robert Lysz was bludgeoned to death with an altar candlestick in the church last June. Michael Ouel-
lette, a mentally ill drifter who had a history of violence and had repeated-ly refused to take prescribed medication, has been charged with murder.

Capital projects in design or construction under the 2010 plan

PARK TOWN AMOUNT WORK
Fort Griswold State Park Groton $380,000 ramp repair
Gillette Castle State Park East Haddam $3 million roof repair
Gillette Castle State Park East Haddam $3.5 million interior renovations
Hammonasset Beach State Park Madison $843,500 New beach boardwalk
Hopeville Pond State Park Griswold $1 million new compact toilet building
Indian Well State Park Shelton $2.5 million various renovations
Kettleltown State Park Southbury $613,756 new camp guard toilet building
Sherwood Island State Park Westport $4 million new pavilions and parking improvements
Wharton Brook State Park Wallingford $1 million various renovations

With a booming state economy, money has been available for luxuries such as parks. But when money is tight as it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, pressing needs such as prisons and educa-tion took priority. Former Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. closed parks and maintenance was deferred.

That era is considered by many to be the lowpoint for the state’s park system, Adams said.

“You’ve got to hold their feet to the fire,” he said.

People need to let their legislator know that the conditions of the parks matter, said Kinderman, the Hammonasset supervisor.