

CONNECTICUT

ON THE WEEKEND

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SECTION

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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



TONY BACEWICZ / THE HARTFORD COURANT

WINSTON JOHNSON, left, of Windsor and Robert Watson of Middletown strip bark from cedar poles that will be used to recreate the railroad station at Gillette Castle State Park. In the background, masons work on scaffolding set up to reconstruct the railroad station that once stood there.

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

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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 closely. "We were playing so hard we didn't even know what the score was," said Kieval.

Klotz's set-shot was finding the bottom of the net time and 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 competitive, so competitive they decided to keep it going," Klotz said

It was tied at the end of regulation and went into overtime. With seconds left, the Reds were up by a point. "Meadow missed a shot and I grabbed the ball and dribbled it out. The timekeeper tried to halt the clock but couldn't. We won."

The crowd was dumbfounded, waiting for the show that never took place. The Reds had no champagne — it would have gone sour between wins — so they dumped orange soda on Klotz's sweaty noggin. Globetrotters owner Abe Saperstein didn't take it well. "He came into the locker room and threatened to

fire everyone, saying 'You're supposed to be losers,' " as Kieval recalled.

No way," said Klotz to Saperstein, "and if you let your guard down, we'll get you again."

All was forgiven. Kieval, a high school and college coach, still does some scouting and officiating for the Globetrotters, and considers the organization his second family.

There's quite a story with the Globetrotters these days. The team was in decline when it was purchased in 1993 by former player Mannie Jackson, then an executive with Honeywell, Inc., for \$5.5 million.

With brainy marketing tie-ins and multimedia promotions, Jackson has revived the Globetrotters, now headquartered in Phoenix (is nothing sacred?) and increased the value of his investment tenfold. He even has the team periodically playing straight against teams such as Kareem's all-stars and college all-star teams.

Maybe there'll be another upset, but it won't be quite like that night in Tennessee. "Meadowlark came into our locker room to congratulate us, which was very nice, but I knew it really killed him to lose," said Klotz. "I turned to my guys and said, 'The man's lying with a straight face.' "

Parks

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employees. A new 16-acre state park in being built along the Thames River in New London for \$20 million, and all seven parks closed to the public during the budget crisis of the early 1990s have been reopened.

"We've been very, very busy," Adams said. "It's nice to see things being done. Things were just really run down. The need was incredible."

Gillette Castle's luxurious interior was damaged when water leaked through the roof. The castle is the latest repair project on the state's long list.

A Newport-style mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford was closed for lack of funds and further deteriorated. It was repaired and reopened in 1998 after the state spent over \$3 million.

And the stunning Heublein Tower atop a prominent traprock ridge in Simsbury was getting sorrier all

the time. It, too, has undergone extensive renovations. Neither Harkness or Heublein were part of the 2010 plan.

Some of the bigger projects currently underway or planned by the state include:

■ Indian Well State Park in Shelton, where \$2.5 million is being spent on a new boat launch, enlarging the beach and installing new toilets and new parking. That work is expected to be completed this year.

■ Sherwood Island State Park in Westport, which is slated to get \$4 million for a new septic system and bathhouses. The work is underway.

■ Wharton Brook State Park in Wallingford, which is expecting \$1 million.

■ Black Rock State Park in Watertown, which is slated to get \$3.8 million. Work at both parks will likely start this year or next year.

Even with the recent largess, Connecticut lags behind other states in the amount of money it spends on its parks. Connecticut, in fact, is at the back of the pack. During fiscal 1997-98, the state spent proportional-

ly less on its parks — \$9.2 million — than every other state except Virginia, according to The National Association of State Park Directors.

States with similar overall budgets spent as much as five times on their parks. Kentucky, for instance, allocated \$65 million on its parks. Oregon spent nearly \$28 million.

State Sen. Eileen M. Daily, D-Westbrook, said funding for park repairs and maintenance has improved, but more is still needed.

"It's certainly not enough. It's not getting us to where we need to be," said Daily, co-chairwoman of the legislature's environment committee. "Everytime we spend money on parks, ... we take giant steps in improving the quality of life in Con-

necticut."

With a booming state economy, more 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 education 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 condition of the parks matter, said Kinderman, the Hammonasset supervisor.

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 medications.

The so-called "Father Lysz Law" is now headed to the appropriations committee.

"I'm still working on some minor adjustments, 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 Forestville section of Bristol. The Rev. Robert Lysz was bludgeoned to death with an altar candlestick in the church last June. Michael Ouellette, a mentally ill drifter who had a history of violence and had repeatedly 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 Battlefield State Park	Groton	\$380,000	rampart 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 west beach boardwalk
Hopeville Pond State Park	Griswold	\$1 million	new campground toilet building
Indian Well State Park	Shelton	\$2.5 million	various renovations
Kittletown State Park	Southbury	\$613,756	new campground toilet building
Sherwood Island State Park	Westport	\$4 million	new pavilions and parking improvements
Wharton Brook State Park	Wallingford	\$1 million	various renovations

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