

Charles River Conservancy
Arborway Coalition
Bay State Trail Riders Association,
Inc.
Berkshire Natural Resources
Council
Boston Cyclists Union
Boston Harbor Now
Brookline GreenSpace Alliance
Charles River Watershed
Association
Charlesgate Alliance
COGdesign (Community Outreach
Group for Landscape Design)
Connecticut River Conservancy
Emerald Necklace Conservancy
Esplanade Association
Friends of Herter Park
Friends of Melnea Cass Boulevard
Friends of the Malden River
Friends of the Middlesex Fells
Reservation
Friends of the Mount Holyoke
Range
Friends of the Mystic River
Friends of Whitehall
Green Cambridge
Lawrence & Lillian Solomon
Foundation
LivableStreets Alliance
Magazine Beach Partners
Massachusetts Forest and Park
Friends Network
Massachusetts Land Trust
Coalition
Massachusetts Rivers Alliance
Mystic River Watershed
Association
Neponset River Watershed
Association
Newton Conservators
Riverside Greenway Working
Group (RGWG)
Southeastern Massachusetts Pine
Barrens Alliance
Southwest Boston CDC
Speak for the Trees
The Harborkeepers
WalkBoston

Secretary Kathleen Theoharides
Attn: Faye Boardman
Chief Operating Officer
Executive Office of Energy and Environment
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02144

April 26, 2021

Dear Secretary Theoharides,

Thank you for your attention to improving the management, operations and asset condition of the natural, cultural and recreational resources held by the Department of Conservation and Recreation through the establishment and support of the DCR Special Commission.

We write to you as a collection of DCR's partner organizations with significant interest in the success of the agency and the work of this Commission. Together, our organizations work to support our Commonwealth's parks, recreation and conservation work, and mission. Collectively, we provide millions of dollars annually in donated support for state parks while also providing expertise, programming, direct public engagement, volunteers, staff capacity, and more. We are adept at galvanizing local communities in the care, activation and protection of our natural resources and well-positioned to contribute to the recommendations and realization of a more effective and efficient DCR.

We urge you to take full advantage of the DCR Special Commission and formally request an extension of the Commission's current timeline beyond June 2021. This is a rare opportunity to leverage the funding provided for the review, commitment of the Commission members, first-hand knowledge of DCR staff members, experience of private sector partners and non-profit friends groups, and attention of the public to identify critical areas for agency investment, operational improvement, policies for increased transparency and equity, and opportunities to leverage external resources. Understandably delayed by COVID-19, the Commission first formally met on March 15, 2021 and were subsequently informed that draft recommendations for changes within DCR would be provided in just one month's time with a final report to follow in June. At the time of this meeting, several Commission members had not yet met with the consulting party, the UMass Donahue Institute, and none of the Commission members had received the required background documentation on DCR's organizational structure, budget and asset management, and more. Records were not shared until April 2, 2021, making it impossible for the Commission to provide informed comments within the provided timeline.

In addition to the truncated, four-month schedule, we have other serious concerns with the DCR Special Commission process:

- **The Special Commission is incomplete.** The enabling legislation of the DCR Special Commission mandates the composition of its members, stating “2 of whom shall be representatives of park friends groups.” At the time of the first meeting, only one of these seats had been filled. We ask for this to be remedied so that the legislative mandate is met and there is adequate representation from those contributing to the care of our state’s rich and diverse resources.
- **There should be more direct engagement with longstanding partners and friends groups.** In addition to completing the Commission, there should be much more direct involvement and information gathering from DCR’s partners to better understand and leverage the support of these stakeholders towards the public good. Partnerships are central to understanding how to “improve the management, operations and asset condition of the natural, cultural and recreational resources held by the department.” Every potential recommendation being considered by the Commission will impact the work of over 100 friends groups that collectively raise tens of millions of dollars and leverage tens of thousands of volunteer hours annually to support the work of DCR and the operation of state parks in every corner of the Commonwealth.
- **The public must have the opportunity to comment.** Additionally, the legislation states that “the Commission **may** solicit public input through public hearings and testimony.” Considering the diverse and public nature of DCR’s resources and constituents, we insist that the opportunity for written public comment and testimony be directly integrated into the work of the Commission, the work of the UMass Donahue Institute, and ultimately the recommendations.
- **The UMass Donahue Institute needs to confer with DCR staff at multiple levels and across regions.** The interview list for DCR employees currently includes Director level staff members and above. While their broad insight is invaluable, we encourage the consultant to consider the input of staff across levels and regions of the state to provide “boots on the ground” context and depth to their findings.
- **The UMass Donahue scope should include a thorough review of best practices in other state-wide park agencies.** Benchmarking is a standard practice that will provide valuable data for the Commission. We should look to state park agencies across the country for potential solutions and best practices.

Thank you for your attention to these important considerations for the DCR Special Commission. With this solid foundation, members will have more complete information to perform the comprehensive review that our partners at DCR and our Commonwealth’s parks deserve. The pandemic may have initially impeded the Commission’s work, but it also reinforced the importance of our public parks for the health, well-being, and resilience of our residents. We stand ready to support the Commission and identify innovative and sustainable solutions for the management of our valuable recreational and natural resources.

Sincerely,



Laura Jasinski, Charles River Conservancy, DCR Special Commission Member with

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Speak for the Trees
The Harborkeepers
WalkBoston

Cc:

DCR Special Commission:

Representative Carolyn Dykema
Senator Rebecca Rausch
Representative Norman Orrall
Commissioner Jim Montgomery
Administrator Jonathan Gulliver
Nathan Peyton
Nate Walton
Kate Bowditch
Buzz Constable
Heather Clish
Guadalupe Garcia
Mary Clutchey
Fran Blanchard

UMass Donahue Institute:

Branner Stewart

Sonia Bouvier

Mark Melnik