



Friends of  
Gillette Castle  
State Park

P.O. Box 152  
Hadlyme, CT 06439  
PH: 860-222-7850  
[info@gillettecastlefriends.org](mailto:info@gillettecastlefriends.org)

April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021

**Testimony in Opposition to Section 10 of SB1103.**

To: Connecticut General Assembly, Environment Committee  
Honorable Co-Chairs, Ranking Members, Vice-Chairs, and Members of  
the Environment Committee:

I am submitting this testimony in **opposition to Section 10 of SB 1103**. In doing so, I am supporting the mission statement of my organization, Friends of Gillette Castle State Park, which was founded in 1998 and is dedicated to the conservation, preservation, and the education of the castle and its grounds. I am serving as the current President.

Section 10 of SB 1103 would permanently halve the revenue flowing into the Passport to the Parks Fund beginning this year. Restricting the Passport to the Parks fee so that owners of multiple cars would only pay one fee would severely restrict revenue coming into the state park system. The fee charged when registering motor vehicles provides a consistent revenue stream coming in to fund the state parks system. Under the program, drivers with Connecticut registration are given free access to all state parks. It should be noted that this applies to parking, but not admission to park museums. Gillette Castle, being a museum, still charges a nominal admission fee to enter the castle. Likewise, of the populations who would be affected by the exemptions in Section 10 of SB 1103, Disabled Veterans and Senior Citizens already get free admission to the castle. The DEEP already has a policy to acknowledge and show value towards these residents. It is estimated that the Passport program provided \$16 million in revenue in 2019 to our state parks. If exemptions were to be made, they would severely reduce that revenue,

by at least 50% and would cause all 110 State Parks to drastically restrict operational budget, staffing, and hours. Rather than providing the necessary funding for our parks, this bill would shift the burden elsewhere and result in less maintenance and availability of state parks.

It is also clear that this bill is being passed without consideration of the impact of the bill within the Department of Motor Vehicles, and without consideration of the broad state budget. The DMV is set-up to track fees per vehicle, not per individual: This bill would require the DMV to incur significant costs to change its systems to be able to track the Passport to the Parks fee by individual. This would deepen the fiscal losses to the state budget that this bill would cause.

Gillette Castle, built from 1914-1919, is a home that was designed, financed, and resided in by William Gillette. William Gillette, a native Nutmegger through and through, was a direct descendant of the Reverend Thomas Hooker, widely considered to be the ‘Father of Connecticut,’ who is thought to have helped inspire the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. William Gillette’s father, Francis was a diligent public servant and was active in many of the progressive movements of the time, such as abolition. His home in Bloomfield was used as a stop on the Underground Railroad. He served the state in many capacities, helping to found the Republic Party in Connecticut, chairing the Connecticut Board of Education, and serving as a State Representative. In the mid-1850’s, he represented Connecticut in the United States Senate. Francis Gillette was the real estate broker who created the Nook Farm neighborhood, attracting the likes of Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe, thus making Hartford the intellectual and cultural center of the nation. William Gillette was a proud native of our state and was one of the most successful actors, directors, and playwrights of his time. He is most well-known as the popularizer on stage of one of the greatest literary characters in our culture, Sherlock Holmes. At present day, his home is a museum open for the public to enjoy during the summer season on a 200-acre park that attracts upwards of 250,000 visitors every year to the State of Connecticut.

The castle is undoubtedly one of the top tourist destinations in the state and I, along with members of my board, have been around to see it go through recent good years and terrible years. In 2016, state fiscal issues caused the unit's budget to be cut by 55%. This led to seasonal maintainers and guides being cut over a month into the operating season. This also led the castle hours being cut. It went from being open 7 days a week, to 4 days. It went from being open 7 hours a day to 6 hours. It went from being open till Columbus Day to closing the

Sunday of Labor Day weekend. Why was it not open for Labor Day? The castle was only open Thursday thru Sunday and therefore had to be closed on a Monday. Likewise, the annual holiday program at the castle was cut. The Gillette Castle State Park Unit encompasses another 7 parks besides the castle. These include Devil's Hopyard, Selden Island, Gardner Lake, Machimoodus and Sunrise. Devil's Hopyard was one of the 3 parks whose campgrounds were forced to close due to the budget constraints. This trend continued for the 2017 season as well.

After "Passport to the Parks" took effect in 2018, the unit regained much of its funding. A full staff was brought on to maintain operation of the park and other parks in the unit. The castle went back to its normal operating days and hours. The only thing unchanged is that castle closed Labor Day that year. While the DEEP had always coordinated the holiday program, the budget still prevented that from happening. In 2018, the Friends of Gillette Castle State Park applied for and received a charitable private grant of \$17,500 from Dominion Energy to fund the program. As an organization, we wrote the State of Connecticut a check so that they would be able to cover the costs of having the castle open for the 2018 Holiday Program. That check covered the costs of staff to keep the castle open, but it did not pay for the staff to decorate the castle. As a Friends group, we worked with other Friends groups, non-profits, community organizations, and local businesses who all volunteered to decorate the castle. That program was well-attended for 5 weekends, cost the State no money, and netted at least \$30,000-\$40,000 for DEEP.

For the 2019 season, the unit again had a full operating budget to work with. The state was able to fully staff the castle. It was open 7 days a

week through Labor Day and stayed open on weekends through Columbus Day. We were unable to get another grant for the holiday program, so Friends group came to an understanding with the State Parks Division- we brought in the volunteers to decorate and DEEP provided the staff for the program. The 2019 holiday program was well-received and was again successful thanks to the collaboration of our Friends group with the state.

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, visitors to state parks, including Gillette Castle, increased by over 10% across the board. This year enabled us to understand the importance of the state park system for providing recreational activities and access to open spaces for all. Every year since the Passport to the Parks began in 2018, more people have been getting to State Parks, and to cut State Park funding now makes no sense.

The impact of the castle reaches far beyond the park borders. More attendance at the castle leads to more people flocking to the area. When the castle is open, it guarantees higher ridership on the Chester-Hadlyme Ferry – a historical landmark, operated by the Connecticut Department of Transportation. The same can be said for the Essex Steam Train, which offers a Castle Connection. Likewise, it brings more people to the surrounding businesses and local shops and restaurants see an uptick in their business when Gillette Castle is open. Groups volunteer to decorate the castle for the holidays as a way to give back. However, they are also vocal about the impact of the publicity they get from the castle. Their participation means more attention to non-profits and more people supporting local businesses. Gillette Castle attracts visitors from all over the world. It is also not the most direct place to get to. People destined for the castle pass through East Haddam, Haddam, Lyme, Old Lyme, Salem, Chester, and many other places where they stop and contribute to the local economy. To restrict money going to the park would be to turn away those visitors and restrict the money coming into those communities. In a time that the State of Connecticut is actively trying to promote tourism, it would be an embarrassment to even consider a bill

that would restrict funding of one of the top tourist destinations in the state.

In William Gillette's last will and testament, he said, "I would consider it unfortunate for me, should I find myself doomed after death to a continued consciousness of the behavior of mankind on this planet to discover the....stone walls and towers and fireplaces of my home...my railway line... that these, and many other things of a like nature... should reveal themselves to me as in the possession of some blithering saphead who has no idea where he is or with what surrounded." Following Gillette's death in 1937, his executors rejected the sale of the castle at auction. Instead, the State Park and Forest Commission, with help from the Connecticut Forests and Parks Association, purchased the property in 1943 and opened it to the public the following year. To pass this bill would be to deny funding to the castle, thus reverting the operation to the that of the 2016/2017 seasons and going against the wishes of William Gillette, himself. The Passport to the Parks program has been extremely successful since it's rollout in 2018 and any exemptions under the program would undo the progress seen within the state park system and prove to be detrimental to the parks and Connecticut residents.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony in your decision regarding Section 10 of SB 1103. Respectfully submitted,

Wendy M. Vincent

President, Friends of Gillette Castle State Park