

# Broken promises: controversies continue over budget raids on money for energy conservation and state parks

Gregory B. Hladky

During high tide at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison, beach goers enjoy the unofficial last beach day of the summer. A new fund to maintain and preserve state parks was recently created, but now lawmakers want to use some of that money for other purposes. (Patrick Raycraft / Hartford Courant)

While some legislators were arguing Friday for restoration of \$54 million in energy conservation funding that's being diverted to solve deficit problems, others were worrying about a planned budget raid on money supposed to go to state parks.

Both situations involve a long-standing habit in the General Assembly of lawmakers promising to use public money for one purpose, and later finding ways to use it for something else.

"The general public doesn't trust the legislature or state government to do what we say we're going to do," said Rep. Geraldo Reyes Jr., D-Waterbury. "To restore our credibility is what is required," he said.

But several key lawmakers defended a proposal to use \$280,000 from the state's recently established Passport to the Parks program, which was created to help Connecticut's deteriorating state park system, for non-park purposes. The new fund uses money from a surcharge on motor vehicle registrations, and in return car owners get free entry to all state parks.

*The general public doesn't trust the legislature or state government to do what we say we're going to do.*

*Rep. Geraldo Reyes Jr., D-Waterbury.*

---

Sen. Cathy Osten, a Sprague Democrat and co-chair of the legislature's Appropriations Committee, said the Democratic budget plan approved by the panel only diverted "a tiny portion of the Passport to the Parks revenue." She said the original legislation creating the parks passport fund does allow for money from those vehicle registration surcharges to be used for other environmental purposes.

"I should know, I helped write the bill and I was one of its biggest supporters," Osten said. She added that the proposed non-state park expenditures "are consistent with [the state's] past use of state parks funding." But during years of public hearings, legislative news conferences and debates in the House and Senate, the primary argument for approving the Passport to the Parks program was the need to provide funding to help preserve and improve the state park system. Lawmakers argued that people wouldn't mind paying additional motor vehicle fees to help save state parks.

Another controversial budget raid by the General Assembly has involved repeated moves to help resolve state deficits by taking tens of millions of dollars from ratepayer funded energy conservation and efficiency programs.

Environmental and pro-alternative energy groups joined lawmakers at a State Capitol event Friday to announce that petitions supporting the restoration of \$54 million in energy conservation funding had gathered more than 2,000 citizen signatures in 116 Connecticut cities and towns.

The conservation programs were established using surcharges on electricity ratepayers' bills and were intended to help fund energy efficiency and solar power installations to cut power needs, reduce electricity bills, and combat air pollution.

Advocates warn that using those monies to help solve regular budget problems betrays promises to ratepayers and endangers hundreds if not thousands of energy-related jobs in this state.

"Diverting our state energy efficiency funds is undermining our state's ability to lower energy burdens on electric ratepayers," said Leticia Colon de Meijas, chair of the Efficiency for All advocacy group.

Several inner city legislators argued that taking that conservation funding away hurts low-income minority families the hardest, in part because they are most in need of relief from high energy costs but also because inefficient energy use adds to the air pollution that is causing extremely high asthma rates in cities. “Our urban minority communities are consistently more impacted by pollution” than other Connecticut residents, Reyes said.

Rep. Mary Mushinsky, D-Wallingford, said the state is now looking at a projected budget surplus for this fiscal year and that there is no longer a need to take that \$54 million out of the energy conservation funds. Energy conservation is “the easiest, most efficient way to eliminate greenhouse gases,” said Mitchel Kvedar, 19, a freshman at Eastern Connecticut State University. Kvedar said his generation considers climate change “our greatest threat” and that taking funding from conservation efforts was a huge mistake. There is a long-standing practice in Connecticut of lawmakers promising to use a portion of public money for a specific purpose and later finding other uses for those funds.

In the 1970s, the state’s lottery gambling program was approved using the argument that all funding from that source would go to support local education. But within a few years, lottery profits were being used to shore up regular state budgets.

In 2018, a new \$10 fee was placed on two-year motor vehicle registrations with the promise that all the money raised would be used to maintain and improve Connecticut’s deteriorating state park system. In return, the Passport to the Parks program would give all Connecticut car owners free entry to all state parks. Environmentalists and park supporters had lobbied for years to win approval for find a new way to help state parks that were deteriorating after repeated budget and staff cuts.

Earlier this week, a Democratic budget plan called for diverting \$280,000 of that money to non-state park uses. Those include \$200,000 for the West River Watershed in New Haven, \$20,000 for the Middletown Fire Training Facility, \$40,000 for the North Branch Conservation District, and \$20,000 for air quality monitoring in western Connecticut towns worried about pollution from a new power plant in New York. We should not be already taking something out of that fund... It shouldn’t be raided.

Rep. Mary Mushinsky on proposals to take money from the new Passport to the Parks program for non-state park uses.

---

“We should not be already taking something out of that fund,” Mushinsky said of the Passport to the Parks program. “It shouldn’t be raided.”

“Money sitting in a pot is very tempting to raid for people up here,” Mushinsky said of the General Assembly.

Sen. Julie Kushner, D-Danbury, argued Friday that using \$20,000 for air quality monitoring in western Connecticut towns was allowed within the language of the Passport to the Parks law. “People who value state parks understand the value of having clean air,” Kushner said.

Kushner added that she doesn’t believe shifting those funds to non-state park purposes would cause credibility problems for lawmakers. “It’s very much in keeping with protecting our natural resources,” she said.

But last month, state House Speaker Joe Aresimowicz said the General Assembly does have “a little bit of a credibility problem, either real or perceived,” because of the way it shifts money promised for one program to another purpose. Aresimowicz said that credibility issue is a major reason why legislative leaders don’t like “earmarking” money for a single purpose, such as the Passport to the Parks fund.

“Things change and we need to adjust midstream,” Aresimowicz said. “That’s why I just don’t like earmarks because they’re really hard to live up to in a changing economy and a changing budget process.”