

August 25, 2017

Mr. Michael Lambert
Bureau Chief, Outdoor Recreation
Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP)
79 Elm Street
Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Mr. Lambert,

We represent a wide array of concerned citizens from nearby locales in Connecticut as well as many other areas of the country, and our backgrounds in American landscape and architectural history, historic preservation, real estate development, hospital architecture, and public advocacy have informed our position about the pending proposals for Seaside State Park, the site originally built as a treatment center for children afflicted with bone and lymphatic tuberculosis. As we have stated in previous letters, this site provides a significant historic resource for the State of Connecticut.

We have followed the steps in the review process with interest, and have carefully studied and evaluated the Environmental Impact Evaluation (EIE) of the Seaside State Park Master Plan for Waterford, Connecticut. ***We strongly urge DEEP to select the proposal for Option 1/Destination Park. We believe that this option is the best of all five options presented, as it would allow a path to creating a jewel of the Connecticut state park system. This option brings together within reasonable development parameters the greatest number of positive results economically, historically, and aesthetically for the town, state, and region at large.*** It presents a special opportunity for the public in offering both passive and active recreation, along with a lodging experience in historic buildings that were designed by the nationally recognized architect Cass Gilbert (1859–1934), amid historic open space. Together, all of these elements would be a distinctive and special place in New England.

The reasons for our position are many. ***Most important, the open space of this 36-acre parcel situated on Long Island Sound offers exceptional potential to embrace BOTH a distinctive landscape AND historic architecture.*** Option 1/Destination Park makes the most of the site's characteristic features, most notably the variety of coastal and upland habitats combined with the historic Cass Gilbert-designed Stephen J. Maher Infirmary and Nurses' Residence and open space (not to mention the duplex residence for staff doctors—designed by New London architect Fred Langdon—and the superintendent's cottage and garage). These buildings and site represent Gilbert's last great essay in campus architecture and planning, before his death in 1934, and just a few years before he completed the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, DC.

The Seaside buildings and the open space itself are economic assets worth much more to the State if they are adaptively reused than if they are demolished. It is well documented that historic properties ***add value***, which has been substantiated by studies through the Main Street program, the National Trust at large, and other historic preservation groups. If the distinctive aspects of the property—in

this case, the Gilbert buildings and the open space itself that are integral to the plan—are demolished or significantly impaired, the opportunity for economic leverage dwindles considerably. The Seaside EIE reports that Option 1/Destination Park could generate \$246,000 annual local revenue and \$642,000 annual State revenue. This option would produce temporary and permanent jobs, not to mention the positive impact on the area for related goods and services by the increased usership of the Park. Option 1/Destination Park provides the most potential for benefitting the State’s park system as a distinctive, one-of-a-kind property, with park land integrated with historic buildings and open space, while mitigating traffic and noise impact because it does not propose overdevelopment at an unreasonable scale. (Neighbors’ concerns about the lack of buffer between the Seaside and the residential area have been mitigated with well-articulated landscaping and lighting plans as well as pro-active planning regarding traffic concerns.) Option 1/Destination Park also possesses the virtues of minimal and temporary and/or mitigated impact on agricultural soils, water resources, traffic, air quality, noise, and light/shadow, as outlined by the EIE report.

By contrast, the only other option that proposes adaptive reuse of the historic buildings—Option 4/Hybrid Park—is an appallingly poor plan. That plan is not only the most expensive for the State, it would also greatly diminish the very qualities that make the Seaside site distinctive and significant. Most important, the larger scale of hotel operations in Option 4 would have the greatest negative impact in terms of the upland and coastal areas of all five options under review, and Option 4’s proposed very high usership would increase traffic significantly to the surrounding neighborhood and would make the Seaside property vulnerable ecologically in the long term. Option 4/Hybrid Park would require so much surface parking that the oversized parking areas would eviscerate the heart of the historic core of the Seaside campus—the wide lawn that stretches west of the Infirmary. The second lodge building (or addition to either of the existing Gilbert-designed historic buildings) very likely would destroy the viewsheds in the landscape to and from the historic buildings, the coastline, and the open space. It would also likely impair the relationship of the historic buildings to one another. ***In essence, Option 4/Hybrid Park proposes an overdeveloped plan—one that, because of its scale and articulation, would not realize the State’s goals to restore, preserve, and reuse the site’s historic landscape and architecture, and would endanger the very qualities that make the site distinctive as well as put the ecological aspects of the site at risk.***

Option 2/Ecological Park and Option 3/Passive Recreation Park, along with the unnumbered “No-Build” option all propose active demolition (Options 2 and 3) of the historic Gilbert buildings or demolition by neglect (“No-Build” Park). These are dreadful, misguided options because the State would be throwing away a golden opportunity to create a special and distinctive space.

For years, Seaside has existed under the radar. Compared to the high profiles of Gilbert’s Minnesota State Capitol (1895–1905), Woolworth Building (1910–1913), and United States Supreme Court (1928–1935), among other well-known projects—most of which are located in highly populated areas—Seaside is an unsung monument in the town of Waterford and in the State at large. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1995, “The Seaside” represents the culmination of many themes in Gilbert’s illustrious architectural career.

Completed in the last year of Gilbert’s life, the sanatorium complex serves as a testament to his many abilities as a designer and planner. Inventive American Shingle-style, English Victorian, and Queen Anne revival elements on the Infirmary and pre-nineteenth-century, French-inspired gable features in the Nurses’ Building harken back to his historicist orientation in early residential projects in St. Paul, Minnesota, and elsewhere. The plan of the Waterford complex incorporates both Beaux-Arts– and picturesque-inspired planning that informed Gilbert’s campus and city plans from Connecticut to

Texas. Gilbert's keen interest in the use of open space and natural vistas at Waterford reminds visitors of his successful designs completed in New Haven on the Green and for Oberlin College on Tappan Square. Furthermore, the civic scale of Seaside was motivated by his highly regarded state capitol designs in Minnesota, Arkansas, and West Virginia, and also the civic center of five Gilbert-designed buildings at Waterbury, Connecticut, anchored by a city hall that has been historically renovated in recent years to spectacular effect. Throughout, Gilbert's two buildings at Seaside are defined by high-quality workmanship—a hallmark of his architectural practice—and a thoughtful integration of architecture, planning, and landscape.

Seaside provides a touchstone for the history of twentieth-century public health; the Infirmery is one of only three buildings remaining in the state where heliotherapy treatment was utilized, from the era before antibiotics were available to treat tuberculosis effectively. The other remaining sanatoria, Uncas-on-Thames in Norwich and Cedarcrest in Hartford, were built twenty years before Gilbert's project at Waterford and are not associated with nationally acclaimed designers. Gilbert's Infirmery thus represents a rare building type in the regional and national landscape. The Waterford project, moreover, was consistent with his philanthropic activities because of its service to indigent children with non-pulmonary forms of tuberculosis. Gilbert took special interest in aiding charities that benefited underprivileged youth as well as those with medical challenges, in part because of the early death of one of his own daughters.

Seaside Sanatorium also offered a strong connection to his adopted home state. After Gilbert had moved East, he acquired a Revolutionary War-era summer house, the Keeler Tavern in Ridgefield, Connecticut, where he relished spending time away from Manhattan. For many reasons, Gilbert felt especially strong ties to the colonial past of the region. His grave, in fact, lies in Ridgefield not far from this retreat.

The campus's Gilbert-designed open space and his Infirmery and Nurses' Building are too important to lose. These historic and cultural resources represent key moments in American landscape and architectural history on a regional and national level. ***If demolished or significantly impaired, they could never be replaced and the State would lose an economically significant resource for the area. They, and the natural resources of the site, should be protected against over-scaled development, which likely would render significant negative change to the distinctive historic open space and architecture of the site as outlined in Option 4/Hybrid Park, which would eviscerate the very qualities that make the site special.***

We strongly believe that the Cass Gilbert-designed open space of the site and his historic buildings should be saved and adaptively reused in Option 1/Destination Park, because that proposal offers the greatest number of economic, historic, and aesthetic benefits within reasonable development parameters for the new Seaside State Park in Waterford, Connecticut.

Sincerely,

Barbara Christen, Ph.D., Baltimore, MD / former executive director of the Cass Gilbert Projects (NY); co-editor of and contributor to Cass Gilbert, Life and Work: Architect of the Public Domain

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Jean Velleu, *St. Paul, MN* / co-founder and president emerita, Cass Gilbert Society

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cc:

Richard Blumenthal, U.S. Senator

Julia Carlton, Associate, Sasaki Associates, Inc.

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Joe Courtney, U.S. Representative, 2nd Congressional District

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Alyssa Lozupone, Architectural Preservationist, State Historic Preservation Officer, Hartford, CT

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Christopher Murphy, U.S. Senator

Robert Nye, Municipal Historian, Town of Waterford

John O'Neill, Chairman, Waterford Historic Properties Commission

Abby Piersall, Director of Planning and Development, Town of Waterford

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Christopher Wigren, Deputy Director, Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation

Media cc:

Boston Globe

Hartford Courant

National Trust for Historic Preservation

New York Times

Washington Post