

**TOWN COUNCIL MEETING: SEPTEMBER 24, 2024**

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY: PUBLIC HEARING - PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO TOWN CODE, CHAPTER 14, ARTICLE III – RECREATIONAL AREAS USE REGULATIONS**

**First Name      Last Name      Street Address      Written Testimony: Per Council rules & procedures, testimony at public hearings is limited to 5 minutes. Please limit your written testimony to what can be reasonably read to the record of the public hearing in 5 minutes.**

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John	Langmaid	Chair, Recreation Commission	<p>Distinguished Councilors, At Tuesday’s Recreation Commission, I was tasked with providing the Council with comments on the Cotton Hollow situation based upon our experience over the years, including some specific recommendations on the Council’s proposed changes to town ordinances. The Recreation Commission is tasked with maintenance, improvement and supervision of town recreational facilities. Notably, the Cotton Hollow Nature Preserve is under the supervision of the Conservation Commission. The reason is plain; the Preserve is not a recreational facility - it is a nature preserve. Nonetheless, we are concerned with folks treating Cotton Hollow as a recreational area, which has led to abuse and destruction of the Preserve. The issue, as we see it, is that the wider community has come to see Cotton Hollow as something other than what it is; a nature preserve. People have come to see it as a type of recreational facility - a swimming hole - and on a hot day a swimming hole is a great place to visit with friends for recreation. As our town ordinances have long commanded, however, Cotton Hollow is “to be used and enjoyed by the public for the purpose of observing natural features and wildlife, with an overall goal of maintaining the preserve in a natural and undisturbed state. Uses other than walking and related nature activities shall be considered prohibited unless approved by the [Conservation] Commission.” Ordinances, 14-54(a). The Conservation Commission has never approved the use of Cotton Hollow as a swimming hole or place to gather for food, drink, drug use, parties or socializing in any form. Of course ordinances are just ordinances; the consequences of violating these ordinances is being asked to leave the Preserve. No one is being arrested for taking a swim or showing up with a cooler. The proposed changes to the ordinances are a mixed bag. Section 14-36(a) proposes to actually remove the swimming prohibition from nature preserves. We strongly oppose this change; is Cotton Hollow to now be a recreational facility? If so that is a fundamental change with sweeping implications. We believe swimming at Cotton Hollow should continue to be prohibited by ordinance, as swimming is not an appropriate use of a nature preserve. Misinformation about the appropriateness of swimming at Cotton Hollow is what created this mess in the first place. Let’s not make it worse by inviting swimming and legally transforming Cotton Hollow into a recreational facility.</p>

Section 14-54(b) prohibits climbing and jumping in Cotton Hollow; the proposed change from rocks to boulders is unobjectionable, but if we're being comprehensive about things that might be improperly climbed the Recreation Commission recommends adding fences, buildings, walls, and ruins. Section 14-54(c) as proposed is largely redundant; picnicking, cookouts, fires and camping are not permitted in preserves (Ord. 14-34; 14-40). Section 14-54(d) as proposed is unnecessary, as the town manager already has operating authority under section 14-44(a), the program approval process already is provided for generally under section 14-44(a), and Cotton Hollow use deviation approval by the Conservation Commission is already required under section 14-54(a). The proposed funding for projects and staffing are welcomed by the Recreation Commission. In particular, we support infrastructure improvements to allow Cotton Hollow to be closed to the public, and funding for the use of park rangers and police to promote public safety, as directed by the town manager and the chief of police. The issue of tree work is broader than just Cotton Hollow. With the frequent acquisition of forested open space, the Town needs to understand its liability exposure to dangerous conditions and, if it wishes to manage liability through tree work, to appropriate the necessary funds to allow tree maintenance at all public forested open spaces. Cotton Hollow is in no way unique in this regard. The problem of misuse of Cotton Hollow as a swimming hole will not, however, be solved by changes to ordinances. Members of our Commission have discussed possibilities. One possibility is to have the Town Manager automatically close the Preserve mid-morning on hot days. Folks out for a morning nature walk would not be impeded, but the gatherings for swimming and socialization will be prevented. Eventually, word will get out and people will stop coming for the improper use of the Preserve. And eventually, it may be possible to reopen on hot days. But not until the abuse and destruction of the preserve is stopped.

Another idea is to combat on-line misinformation about Cotton Hollow. If you google Swimming Holes Near Hartford, Cotton Hollow is prominently mentioned on Yelp, reddit, TripAdvisor, swimmingholes.org, newenglandwaterfalls.com, and explorect.org. Some of these sites invite corrections, and we should make those corrections. Others function more like bulletin boards and we could add factual corrections. And others might take down misinformation if a demand was lodged. There may well be other ideas, but the Recreation Commission is united in support of protecting Cotton Hollow from destruction and abuse as a recreational facility, and restoration of its proper role as a nature preserve. Lastly, given some widely publicized comments, the Commission encourages the Council to learn more about the park ranger program. These town employees provide important and flexible services at over a dozen sites throughout Glastonbury. If elected leaders can't treat them with respect, how can we expect the public to do so? Rangers provide our park-using (and preserve-using) public with safety and information services, and are well-trained in, among other things, de-escalation and sensitivity, as well as CPR, first aid, and narcan. They are not Cotton Hollow parking lot attendants. They address littering and illegal dumping at all our parks. They go wherever needed, they tell visitors what may be done, and make clear what is prohibited. They document vandalism, broken equipment, safety hazards, illegal dumping and unauthorized use of athletic fields. The list goes on and on, but I can say with confidence that our problems with trash, drinking and dangerous activities would be far more extreme without the efforts of our park rangers. Please appreciate them. Respectfully, John Langmaid, Chair, Recreation Commission