

The Boston Globe

Green Sweep

Years of budget cuts have left the state's parks a mess. But ex-commissioner Kathy Abbott is working to bring them back to life, determined not to let politics get in her way this time.



Weeds and garbage mar the Boston side of the Longfellow Bridge, managed by the state parks department. (Photo / Matt Kalinowski)

By Michael Blanding | August 6, 2006

YOU CAN'T BEAT THE VIEW from the top of Pine Hill, a 243-foot summit in the Middlesex Fells Reservation north of Boston. On this blue-sky summer day, the Zakim Bridge stands out like a spider web strung between the skyscrapers of Boston. Behind it, the Hancock and the Pru thrust their muscular profiles into the sky, framed by the silhouette of the far-off Blue Hills. "You can see the whole Boston basin," says former Massachusetts parks commissioner Kathy Abbott, standing atop the rocky outcropping and motioning to the landscape as if she's smoothing out the folds of a map. "There's a ring of hills left over from when the glaciers moved through."

This view of the city is one of the best anywhere, as long as you don't look down. At Abbott's feet, the sun glints off thousands of shards of broken glass, and around her, graffiti tags mar the rocks. Once upon a time, visitors could climb Wright's Tower on the peak for an even better view. Now a half-burned heap of litter sits behind its locked gate. "How hard would it be to have a ranger come and unlock it in the morning and lock it up at night?" asks Mike Ryan, head of the nonprofit Friends of the Middlesex Fells, who is showing Abbott around today. It's a rhetorical question. The 2,500-acre park doesn't have a dedicated ranger.

Abbott, who is 49 and lives in Cambridge with her wife, Bentley College vice provost Traci Logan, purses her lips as she listens to the story of another park on the skids. In the summer of 1976, she worked in Concord as a laborer for the National Park Service and since then has spent much of her career as a ranger or park administrator. In 2003, she was appointed to her dream job, head of the state Department

of Conservation and Recreation, by Republican governor Mitt Romney. He asked for her resignation a little more than a year later. Today, she has traded in her pantsuit for a blue-denim shirt and jeans. Walking the Fells with Ryan, she bends to pick up a discarded coffee cup. "Anyone who does trash cleanup," she says, "will tell you that it's Dunkin' Donuts, cigarette butts, and lottery tickets."

Never mind why anyone would bring scratch tickets to this wilderness. Abbott is taking her own gamble by continuing to advocate for the same government agency she was forced to leave. In May, she launched a nonprofit group in Boston called the Conservation and Recreation Campaign. Its goal: bringing together citizens who care about the state parks and needling legislators and candidates in the governor's race to commit the money needed to rejuvenate them. A 2006 survey by *Governing* magazine of per-capita state funding for parks ranked Massachusetts 48th out of 50 - and dead last when calculated as a percentage of personal income. In the last five years, Abbot says, the Massachusetts parks department has lost 20 percent of its staff . And her sources in the department tell her it has a backlog of maintenance and repairs that will cost \$1.2 billion to complete. A department spokesperson calls this "a fairly targeted figure" but notes that it includes \$500 million worth of bridge repairs, which has been shifted to the Massachusetts Highway Department.[Continued...](#)

The new campaign's board includes heavy hitters from both sides of the political fence, including former National Park Service director Roger Kennedy, embattled Massachusetts Turnpike Authority chairman Matthew Amorello, and former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis. "When I was governor, flowers were blooming on Storrow Drive; the place sparkled. Now there are bridges that haven't been painted since I left office," says Dukakis, calling the current administration out of touch. "People like Romney and [Lieutenant Governor Kerry] Healey just don't care about it. They wouldn't know a state park if it hit them in the face." The onetime Democratic presidential nominee has known Abbott for more than a decade. "She's a real pro," Dukakis says. "I remember commending Romney for finally picking her after years and years of disasters."

THE PARKS' PROBLEMS do not date to the start of the Romney administration. In fact, when he became governor in 2002, Romney took a big step forward. At that time, outside Boston, the Department of Environmental Management took care of state land, while in the metro area, parks and parkways were managed by the Metropolitan District Commission. The new governor pushed to merge the agencies, long criticized for bloated bureaucracy and patronage appointees.

"Every park in Massachusetts should be world-class," Romney said when he announced a merger plan in February 2003, "and the way to achieve this is to create a unified, world-class management system." A few months later, the Legislature agreed and created the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

To head the new department, Romney tapped Abbott, then head of the Island Alliance, an innovative private-public partnership that had managed the creation of Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area and raised private money to support it. Taking the job meant coming full circle for Abbott, who had begun her career as a ranger in the Boston Harbor Islands State Park in 1979. Shortly after, she was promoted to the planning office for the islands, and then worked in the Department of Environmental Management's planning office under Governor Dukakis through the 1980s. "We had all of this money - ha-ha," she says now. The money ran out as the state entered a recession, and Abbott was put in charge of downsizing some areas of the department. "I was dismantling programs I had helped create, laying off friends," she says. "It was hard."

Staying in the department into the first year of the administration of Republican governor William Weld, Abbott finally jumped ship for the nonprofit sector. During the mid-1990s, she worked at the School for Field Studies, traveling the world to oversee academic programs in Kenya, Costa Rica, British Columbia, and elsewhere. She joined the Island Alliance in 1997, serving as its director until Romney tapped her in 2003.

Abbott quickly discovered how far the parks department had fallen in the decade she'd been away. Almost nothing was computerized, so her office had no way of knowing what structures, equipment, or

even staff were in any park at any given time. "They had maps of the properties but nothing more than that," she says.

"We couldn't tell you what it cost to run an individual facility." Nevertheless, at one of her first meetings, she says she was told to cut 15 percent from the budget. "It quickly became apparent to me that the folks who had campaigned on world-class parks had no idea what shape the system was in," she says. Abbott was able to hold the line on these cuts but says she won few friends in an administration where downsizing was a virtue. She did, however, gain high marks with both environmental advocates and bean counters for her efforts to fix the management structure. She developed a three-year plan: to do an inventory of property and resources in the first, put a database in place in the second, and demonstrate effective management in several showplace parks by the third.

She never had the chance. After only a little more than a year in office, a snowstorm in February 2005 struck the city. The Department of Conservation and Recreation maintained roads and paths on park property at the time, and four teenagers walking on the VFW Parkway in West Roxbury because of a snow-covered sidewalk were struck and injured by a truck. The administration asked Abbott and three of her senior staff to resign.

Abbott contends that the unplowed sidewalk was only a pretext for her departure. "They tell me it's the snow, it's the snow; it's all your fault," she says. But she believes it was political. "I may have advocated too strongly for the needs of my agency over the needs of the administration, is how I would put it," she says haltingly. She was perceived as disloyal, Abbott says, when she resisted an attempt by Romney to put an unqualified patronage appointee in one of the most important positions in the agency. (That candidate later withdrew.)

Eric Fehrstrom, a spokesman for the governor's office, says: "It was an accident that caused injury to four young people. At the time, Kathy Abbott admitted that she failed to do her job." But Jim Gomes, president of the nonprofit advocacy group Environmental League of Massachusetts, has another interpretation of events: "Kathy was telling an inconvenient truth - that you can't have a world-class park system without the resources. The message she was delivering was off -message for the administration, and that's why the governor let her go."

DESPITE HER OUTSIDER STATUS, Abbott's years of experience may prove to be a real strength in her new campaign. Talking about the parks, she hardly comes across as a bomb-thrower, still referring to her old department as "we" and defending its decisions as often as she criticizes it. But to be successful, her campaign will have to persuade the state to part with a lot of cash fast. "It's a downward spiraling thing," she says. "We've crossed a tipping point where we have such little staff and equipment that we can't make do anymore." The question is: In a state making pricey new promises on healthcare and education, will politicians heed the call of the wild?

In addition to the parks and state forests, the Department of Conservation and Recreation manages parkways, bridges, pools, hockey rinks, beaches, and historical sites - all of which need maintenance and many of which need major repairs. In January, months before the July Big Dig tunnel accident that killed a motorist, a 10-foot granite slab fell into the roadway from the department-maintained Reid Overpass in Cambridge. (No one was injured.) In June at Middlesex Fells, a teenager drowned while swimming with friends in a reservoir posted with no trespassing signs. Mike Ryan from the Fells group attributes the death to a pattern of lax enforcement that escalated into regular lawbreaking. "Thus it boils down to a funding issue," he said in an e-mail after the accident.

In other ways, large and small, parks across the state have suffered. In the Southwest Corridor Park in Boston, the sprinkler system hasn't been turned on for four or five years, says Donna Johnson, a market research consultant who lives in the South End and is head of the nonprofit Southwest Corridor Park Conservancy. In that time, she estimates, the park has lost a third of its plants. At Blue Hills Reservation in Milton, animal pens at the trailside museum sit empty due to lack of funds for upkeep. Along the Esplanade in

Boston, historic granite landings on the Charles River are crumbling.

Just as deplorable in a state that prizes its history, many historic sites sit closed or decaying. At the 1,773-acre Borderland State Park, on the border of Sharon and Easton, water has damaged the walls and ceilings of its centerpiece Ames Mansion, the country estate of the prominent Ames family. Bindings are peeling off books in the library, while Governor Oliver Ames's private papers sit moldering in an upstairs closet. The 20-room mansion is only open a handful of days throughout the year, and it's probably just as well. "That building should be a showplace," says Bob Babineau, the supervisor from 1980 until 2003. "The state has never spent a dime to repair a piece of furniture or replace a rug." He says that cost cutting has demoralized some employees, especially those who put in unpaid nights and weekends to fix equipment, clean bathrooms, and do paperwork. Babineau took an early retirement deal from the state and does seasonal work at the Adams National Historic Park in Quincy, a comparative jewel administered by the National Park Service. "It had gotten to the point where it felt like I wasn't accomplishing anything," he says.

The places that may have fared worst of all, though, are outside the Boston area, where now only 18 fulltime rangers maintain and patrol 450,000 acres of state-owned parks and forests. Some properties have been padlocked; at others, campgrounds are unattended at night, posing yet another safety hazard. Even Mount Greylock in Berkshire County, the state's highest peak, is in danger of being closed. "The road is just a mass of craters and jersey barriers holding it from sliding down the hill," says Tad Ames, president of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council, a nonprofit conservation group in Western Massachusetts.

In some areas, so-called Friends groups like those run by Ryan and Johnson have picked up some of the slack. In Boston, the private Esplanade Association has raised several million dollars from area businesses and residents of neighboring Back Bay and Beacon Hill for repair of the landings and mammoth rotting docks. Its members also organize well-attended volunteer cleanups and gardening events. The group is trying to raise at least \$2.5 million more to finish major repairs.

Outside tony neighborhoods in downtown Boston, it's even harder. Private donors and the Department of Recreation and Conservation spent \$500,000 to renovate the Melnea Cass pool in Roxbury this year, but according to the department, only one neighborhood resident donated to the project. Many areas of Western Massachusetts are too sparsely populated to support volunteer groups. And even when these groups have money, they complain that providing for the parks' basic upkeep wasn't in their original missions. Through Johnson's Southwest Corridor group, residents of the South End, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain have raised thousands of dollars. They didn't want to, but this summer they hired a private contractor to mow the grass, to help fill the void created by shrinking state funding. "There was a time when they had tennis lessons, playground programs, concerts in the amphitheaters," says Johnson. "We don't want to take on maintenance for the entire park."

In September, seven months and two interim commissioners after Abbott's departure, the administration named Stephen Burrington, then an undersecretary in the state development office, as head of the Department of Conservation and Recreation. The department's budget increased this year to \$83 million, allowing for the purchase of things like small vehicles (including lawnmowers and four-wheeled ATVs) and graffiti removal services. Even Burrington admits such measures are Band-Aids on a system that continues to decay. At a recent heated public meeting on parkways in Jamaica Plain, he cited a decline of "20 to 30 percent of our staff over the past 10 years" as the agency's biggest challenge. "So many things have been allowed to deteriorate for so long, it compounds problems," he said, echoing Abbott.

AFTER SHE LEFT the department, Abbott says she didn't want to do "anything parks or anything political." But environmental advocates convinced her to keep fighting. Abbott kicked off her campaign in May in an office at the New England branch of the Trust for Public Land, a national land conservation group. While most of her board members are Democrats, Abbott has signed up a few Republicans as well, including former state agriculture commissioner Jay Healy and Amorello, who worked with Abbott on the Rose Kennedy Greenway. He prizes her practical attitude toward problem solving. "I would have no

idea what her party affiliation is," he says. "She knows the limitations of working within the state budget system as well as the challenges of trying to raise a private dollar."

Abbott's campaign has commissioned a study to find out just how much the parks contribute to the state's economy, a step that has helped parks advocates in other states persuade politicians to increase budgets. "The multiplier effect is fairly significant," says Daniel McLean, an Indiana State University professor who researched park funding trends as a consultant to the National Association of State Parks Directors. "A number of businesses depend on state parks, employees work there, and states often spend locally for goods and services." McLean says that Massachusetts's problems are not unique. "When budget cuts come, parks are very frequently among the first to take those cuts, and because they are a small part of the budget, cuts tend to be more dramatic," he says. While there is no one strategy for turning things around, he says other states like Missouri and Colorado have spread the burden of paying for parks to three sources: general state coffers, user fees on parking and camping, and so-called dedicated revenue, such as an earmarked percentage of sales or gas taxes.

Even Abbott admits a dedicated revenue stream would be a tough sell for Massachusetts, where 2 cents of the 5-cent sales tax are already earmarked for transportation and higher education. As for user fees, camping and parking fees at some parks - including Borderland - were increased several years ago to make up a budget shortfall, but not all of that goes back to the parks. That leaves the general fund. Abbott's message is that the department's budget needs to be increased by \$40 million over the next four years to fix the ailing system. In January, a poll of 600 Massachusetts residents, commissioned by Abbott, found that 70 percent would support a \$40 million increase for state parks. About the same percentage of respondents said they'd be willing to pay an additional \$20 in annual state taxes for it. "We find there is a huge willingness to pay on these issues - even in Republican areas," says Abbott. "People are into protecting and managing the environment." Not everyone is convinced, however. "I want you to find 20 people who will tell you that," says Therese Murray, chairwoman of the state Senate Committee on Ways and Means. "People don't want to pay more taxes; they want their taxes lowered." While the state budget has grown with the economy in recent years, Massachusetts has also taken on new challenges, such as healthcare funding. "Despite the headlines of surpluses, we are not in the position where we can fund anything," says Michael Widmer, head of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, a nonpartisan citizens watchdog group that analyzes state spending choices. While Widmer says the amount the campaign is asking for is modest, "the issue gets lost in higher priorities, more visible priorities, such as education, public safety, healthcare, and aid to cities and towns." And since the majority of parks, beaches, and reservations are clustered around Boston, they don't have the same constituency as issues like education, which is important all over the state. "Like any budget item, it needs a legislative champion," says Widmer, "either the governor or someone in the Legislature to take this on."

As for the current governor's race, Abbott is lobbying candidates to put parks on their agendas. "The question is, is he or she willing to put this on their short list of priorities?" asks Widmer. "Because if you have too long of a list, then you don't have any priorities." Veteran political analyst and Boston University communications professor Tobe Berkovitz is skeptical that any candidates will campaign on the issue. "I've been a political consultant for 30 years, I've worked on state rep campaigns, Senate campaigns, presidential campaigns, and parks have never come up as an issue," says Berkovitz. "It's hard to get voters energized in the first place, and then it tends to be the hot-button emotional issues like education or values issues like gay marriage that get people to the polls. Few people get emotionally outraged about the conditions of our parks."

This gubernatorial race, however, may prove him wrong. Democratic candidate Tom Reilly has added language in his platform about the need to increase funding to fix the parks, even while he won't commit to a specific amount. Not to be outdone, Democrat Deval Patrick spoke up at a recent debate on the environment, promising a \$50 million increase to parks if he's elected. "We need to connect the dots on environmental issues," he told a crowd of 1,000 people at MIT in July, adding that the state would lose tourist dollars if its green infrastructure were to crumble. Shortly after the debate, he clarified his position: \$50 million should go to land acquisition, and he would increase the parks budget by \$10 million his first year in office.

In a sign that Abbott's message is beginning to resonate, the Legislature last month put an additional \$11.6 million for the parks in the state budget, with \$9.3 million surviving after the governor's vetoes, according to the Massachusetts Taxpayers Association. "I think Kathy had a lot to do with that," says the Environmental League's Gomes. "She brings a unique credibility to the issue and has been able to mobilize Friends groups around the state who heretofore didn't have much impact at the State House. Kathy brought them together and made their voice heard." And state Representative Paul Donato of Meford was able to slip \$100,000 into next year's budget for the renovation of Wright's Tower as well as funding for four park rangers for the Middlesex Fells. Despite all this good news, Abbott vows that the campaign is just getting started. "There are certain things you can do from the inside and certain things you can do from the outside," she says. "I am sorry I had to resign and didn't finish what I started, but in the long run this may prove to be more helpful." If she misses her old job, she doesn't show it.

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(Editor's note: A story about the condition of the state's parks in yesterday's Globe magazine referred to Matthew J. Amorello as the ``embattled" Massachusetts Turnpike Authority chairman. Amorello was ousted from his position after the magazine had been printed.)■

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 **PHOTO GALLERY: [Problems at Massachusetts parks](#)**
