

LD 988

March 18, 2023

My name is Jessica Russell and I am writing in support of LD 988 (Resolve, Directing the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to Conduct an Accessibility Study of All Maine State Parks and Historic Sites and to Develop a Plan to Remove Access Barriers).

I joined the disability community fast and furious at the age of eighteen by being rendered a quadriplegic instantly as a passenger in a car accident. Up to that point, I was very active, participated in sports and physical activities, and I was even on my college soccer team at the time of my injury. I enjoyed being active and being outdoors – and that has never changed. What did change was the access I am granted to continue to enjoy these same activities that I did when I was able-bodied. Once you live life on wheels, most of the world around you becomes an obstacle. This doesn't need to be the case. We, as humans, are always evolving and problem solving. We can easily make our world more accessible for all, not only the disabled. Accessible and universal design benefits our aging population, children and their caretakers, and people who are recovering from temporary injuries. We have all been and hopefully will live long enough to be a part of every population that benefits from intentional accessible design.

Our beautiful state of Maine has 48 state parks and historic sites. From my understanding, a new initiative has been launched to rebuild these parks. Why not allocate these funds to improving our great Maine outdoors for ALL residents? Give us spaces where anyone at any age and in any condition can have a reprieve from their day to day life. Think about how you feel after a walk through the woods or the way ocean air just hits different. We all want that and that is why we all live in Maine.

As a wheelchair user, beach access is at the very top of my wish list. I want every state park beach to be equipped with beach mats, boardwalks, or any path that allows access in an everyday wheelchair AND floating beach wheelchairs. The best beach wheelchairs out there are [MobiChair Floating Beach Wheelchairs](#) which are comfortable for the user, can roll on sand, and can float in water. I make a point each summer to visit Wells Beach with my family where these chairs are free to rent. Unfortunately, they are in such high demand on a first come first serve basis that you have to arrive very early in the morning to secure them, and sometimes that is not even enough. One of my best memories with my son was a full day at the beach when he was six years old. He thought it was SO COOL for me to actually be in the water with him. I cried tears of joy (inconspicuously thanks to the salt water) and I always treasure that one day where I felt free in the ocean with my family. From what I see (utilizing the state's web search capabilities) there are thirteen state parks with beach access. Can we provide each of these with at least one floating beach wheelchair (if not more)? I know Crescent Beach in Cape Elizabeth does offer access to one, but let's make the same access a statewide offering by covering the other parks with beaches in Edmunds Township, New Harbor, Farmington, South Harpswell, Saco, Phippsburg, Falmouth, Camden, Lubec, Georgetown, and Scarborough.

Second on my wish list is that more trails are made accessible. I know of a handful of trails in my vicinity that I can navigate in my chair and I appreciate each and every one of those. There is an effort locally in my area (Portland) and around the state to provide more trail access for wheelchairs. I am so thankful that each year there seems to be a few more trails that I can try out. The opportunity to get in some solid activity (20 to 30 minutes of exercise) outdoors is invaluable for mental health and longevity.

In conclusion, please consider that removing barriers within our state parks falls well within this funding and benefits every single Mainer of every age and ability, but also disability.

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