

Question 6 would dedicate existing tax revenue to conservation | Opinion

Brad Campbell Special to the Daily News

Oct. 17, 2026, 4:45 a.m. ET

Massachusetts routinely ranks near the bottom, or dead last, among U.S. states when it comes to funding land conservation, local parks, and water resource protection. But it doesn't have to be that way, and this fall we have an opportunity to change it.

For decades [our state has failed](#) to provide the resources cities and towns needed to preserve and enhance cherished woods and open space, protect ground and surface waters from toxic pollution, and provide hunters, anglers, campers, bikers, and everyday park users with the woods, waters, fields, and trails we need to connect to nature. That lack of funding for nature results in poorer health, more polluted waters, the permanent loss of magnificent landscapes and wildlife, and massive financial losses when extreme weather hits.

This November we can turn things around by voting YES on Question 6 on the statewide general election ballot. The [Protect Water and Nature ballot initiative](#), supported by virtually every environmental organization in the state, will not only allow us to preserve forests, farms, waters, and natural wildlife habitat, it will provide funds to create new parks and improve the parks and trails we have now. All without raising taxes.

Question 6 would also provide the resources cities and towns need to build their natural defenses against extreme weather – such as enhanced wetlands to temper flooding and coastal erosion; and better tree canopy to improve air quality and mitigate sweltering heat.

If passed, the ballot initiative will provide as much as \$100 million each year to conserve and improve our natural resources now, and for future generations. It does so by dedicating the sales tax we already pay on sporting goods to create a dedicated revenue stream solely for conservation use. This isn't a new idea – more

than 30 states currently have some form of dedicated revenue stream to support open space, initiated and supported by leaders of both parties. The Massachusetts fund would use the sales taxes we already collect from purchases on nature-dependent uses like camping gear and fishing supplies to make sure there is actually open space in which to use them.

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Without a dedicated funding stream, investments in conservation will continue to be the last funded and the first cut in the Legislature's annual budget scrum. The Commonwealth's stated commitments to doubling the pace of land conservation, increasing biodiversity, and protecting the natural treasures essential to our quality of life and the regional economy will never be met.

That's why [Gov. Healey](#) recently announced that she supports Question 6 as a way to protect our lands and waters, expand access to nature, and ensure clean water for future generations.

The urgency and importance of approving Question 6 has been amplified by cuts in environmental funding and programs at the federal level, especially for communities and neighborhoods with the fewest resources. Sixty-nine percent of low-income Massachusetts residents live in areas with little or no easy access to fields, parks, swimming, and hiking, diminishing quality of life, physical and mental health, and the well-being of children. Access to nature in Massachusetts should not be a privilege limited to the most affluent communities.

I've seen firsthand how transformative it can be to have funding available for local parks, land and water protection, and nature-based climate solutions. For decades, New Jersey (where I led the Department of Environmental Protection) has had dedicated funding averaging over \$200 million per year for these purposes, strongly supported by governors and legislative leaders of both parties. I was stunned when I came to Massachusetts and found that state funding has long been a mere fraction of that amount.

Question 6 is our opportunity to change that.

A dedicated funding source would allow us to protect forests, farms and wetlands, improve parks and trails, and expand access to nature while advancing the state's climate and conservation goals. And a "Yes on 6" would remind our elected officials that support for clean air, clean water, and access to nature is common ground for residents across the Commonwealth.

Brad Campbell is president and CEO of Conservation Law Foundation. He is a former regional administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency's mid-Atlantic region and former commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.