

Cutting Council On Environment Hurts State

By AMY BLAYMORE PATERSON

In April, the Council on Environmental Quality released Environmental Quality in Connecticut 2016, its annual report on the condition of the state's air, water, land and wildlife. The report is built upon 30 environmental indicators that measure the state's progress toward meeting its goals during the past 10 years or longer. Unfortunately, this report could be the council's last.

We are lucky to be able to rely upon the council to give us an independent and objective analysis of the conditions that impact our state's environment and public health. Created in 1971, and acting through its volunteer board and just two paid staff, the council is the state's only environmental watchdog agency, providing the public with a multitude of services efficiently, effectively and at minimal cost (\$174,000) to the state. There is likely no other state agency that does so much for so little.

Yet despite its obvious value to the public, the council is slated for elimination under Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's budget, with no apparent sign of restoration in the budget proposals proffered by the Republicans and Democrats.

While it's easy to think what effect the savings of \$174,000 will have on the state budget (not much, in fact, it's less than 0.001 percent of the general fund), it is unfathomable to think what the public will do without Council on Environmental Quality.

Here are just some of the services the public would lose if the state eliminates the council:

Complaints: Suppose you discover an environmental problem, and nobody seems to be doing anything about it. The council provides a public forum for citizens to raise and address these problems.

Here's just one example. After 30 years of knowing their drinking water wells were polluted, with no help from the state other than water filters, residents of the Tylerville section of Haddam came to the council, which focused on the case intently. Since the council became involved, there have been thorough studies and enforcement actions (court cases) taken against the apparent polluters.

Annual reports: The annual report tells you things you are not likely to learn through other means — things you might need to know as a citizen or a decision-maker. How would you know that we had 31 “bad air days” last year and need to do more to control pollution; that Connecticut's turtles and woodland birds are declining sharply; that (no coincidence) the state is not meeting its land-conservation goals and that we will not meet our goals for limiting pollution that causes climate change?

Special reports: The council has produced a library of special reports on a variety of issues of concern to public health and the environment. Detailed and science-based, these reports have often served as helpful guides for new state policy. Recent examples include “Preserved But Maybe Not: The Importance of State Conservation Lands” and “Energy Sprawl in Connecticut,” both of which include recommendations that have led to important bills under consideration by the General Assembly.

Keeping the public informed: If the state is proposing a transportation project or a sewer system in your town, or it proposes to cut down thousands of trees around your local airport, how do you find out and keep track? It's all in the Environmental Monitor, the council's official site for sharing project information under the Connecticut Environmental Policy Act and for proposed transfers of land, published monthly for the public.

Simply put, if there were no Council on Environmental Quality, where would you turn to get unbiased, independent information about Connecticut's environment, and where would you turn to report your concerns?

The elimination of this critical agency will not result in any meaningful benefit to the state's budget or general operation. Instead, the public will pay the price of being less informed and may have no way, other than going to court, to resolve local environmental problems.

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