

CONNECTICUT  
Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 5048  
Appropriations Committee  
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director  
February 23, 2024

Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice-Chairs Hartley, Exum, and Paris, Ranking Members Berthel and Nuccio, and members of the Appropriations Committee:

*The Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) is the state's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, including its ~120 land trusts. We advocate for land conservation, stewardship, and funding, and work to ensure the long-term strength and viability of the land conservation community in Connecticut.*

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of CLCC in support of **House Bill No. 5048, An Act Adjusting The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June 30, 2025** (Governor's FY 25 Midterm Budget), as it relates to CLCC's 2024 conservation funding priorities.

As we evaluate the Governor's FY 25 Midterm Budget, we do so with a recognition of the critical need to increase investments in the programs and projects that protect the state's natural environment, public health, and economic well-being, particularly as they impact underserved and vulnerable communities that have been disproportionately affected by climate change, and other environmental and health hazards.

Through that lens, CLCC offers the following comments concerning HB 5048:

**Protection of Dedicated Funds:** CLCC is grateful to the Governor and Connecticut General Assembly for the protection and continued full funding of the Community Investment Act account, which provides a consistent source of dedicated revenue outside of the budget for investments in open space, farmland/dairy support, historic properties, and affordable housing programs in communities across the state. Likewise, CLCC is pleased to see the Passport to the Parks program revenues used as intended in the Governor's FY 25 Midterm Budget to support State Park System operations and maintenance.

**ARPA Expenditures for DEEP:** CLCC is pleased to see that there have been no adjustments to the Governor's allocation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars for the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) to support investments in outdoor recreation, land trust, and park infrastructure and renovations, accessibility, and for climate equity urban forestry. These continued investments are critical to advancing the state's efforts to ensure that the benefits of nature and outdoor recreation are accessible to everyone everywhere. We urge the Committee to continue to prioritize these and other allocations that will commit Connecticut's remaining ARPA funds to support similar projects that invest in our natural environment by the deadline of December 31, 2024.



**ARPA Expenditure for Statewide Resiliency Planning and Climate Responsiveness:** CLCC strongly supports the Governor's proposed allocation of \$5.75 million to the Office of Policy and Management to prepare for and adapt to changing climate conditions. Implemented through **S.B. 11, An Act Coordinating Connecticut Resiliency Planning And Broadening Municipal Options For Climate Resilience**, this ARPA allocation would provide new tools, strengthen existing programs and policies, and foster increased local, regional, and state coordination to help prepare for and respond to the short and long-term impacts of the changing climate, which are growing in severity across all landscapes.

**Personnel for DEEP:** CLCC supports the proposed increases to DEEP's staff, including adding employees for programs and policies that advance environmental equity and justice. However, budget cuts in previous years and a mass exodus of DEEP employees electing to retire have significantly reduced staffing for the agency's environmental and conservation programs and enforcement and compliance—while their responsibilities continue to grow. We contend that more investments in personnel are necessary to enable DEEP to effectively implement core programs and uphold its enforcement and other essential duties across the agency, with the following programs most directly connected with CLCC's land conservation mission:

- **Land Acquisition:** Working closely with our colleagues in the agency's Land Acquisition and Management Unit (LAM), we appreciate the challenges in implementing core programs that are essential to state and local land conservation efforts. There are currently six (6) employees in the LAM Unit; in 2008, there were eleven (11). To ensure LAM has adequate resources to support the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition, Urban Green and Community Garden, and other grant programs, administer the unprecedented availability of federal match funds, and accelerate the pace of conservation to meet state open space goals, we ask the Committee to consider a specific request of at least three (3) additional staff with expertise in land conservation transactions and grant management.
- **Inland Wetlands and Watercourses (IWW):** Wetlands are vital for wildlife and biodiversity, water quality, flood prevention, disease control, and carbon sequestration and storage. Given their rapid disappearance and critical role, DEEP must be equipped to protect Connecticut's remaining wetlands. DEEP's responsibilities under the IWW Act include training, assistance to municipal commissions, and regulation updates. It is our understanding that there are no staff members dedicated to this program at DEEP. We urge the Committee to allocate five (5) additional staff to fulfill DEEP's crucial role in safeguarding wetland resources.

The imperative for increased investment in personnel, programs, and services aimed at safeguarding our natural and working lands, public health, and economic prosperity is underscored by the public's growing demand for access to open space, the increasing challenges to our natural environment, and the vital role of nature-based solutions in mitigating the escalating effects of the inter-related crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments and for all you do. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.