

CONNECTICUT
Land Conservation Council

Testimony on Governor's House Bill No. 5037
Appropriations Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
Connecticut Land Conservation Council
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Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice-Chairs Hartley, Dathan, and Nolan, Ranking Members Miner and France, 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 ~130 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 **H.B. No. 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023** (referred to herein as Governor's 2023 Budget Budget Adjustments) as it relates to CLCC's 2022 conservation funding priorities.

Throughout the pandemic, people across the state have turned to public and private open spaces, forests, and parks – in record numbers – as a source of solace and safe refuge. We know that having access to these greenspaces is a necessity for all people, no matter where they live, in order to stay physically and mentally healthy. We also know that working and natural lands are essential in addressing the climate crisis, halting an alarming decline in biodiversity, and keeping our air and water clean – ecosystem services which enhance our quality of life and strengthen our local and state economies.

As we evaluate the Governor's 2023 Budget Adjustments, we do so with a recognition of the critical need to increase investments in the programs and projects that protect the state's environment, public health, and economic well-being, particularly in underserved and vulnerable communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, climate change, and other environmental and health hazards. Through that lens, CLCC offers the following comments with respect to the 2023 Budget Adjustments:

Protection of Dedicated Funds: We wish to express our gratitude 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 being used as intended in the Governor's Budget for capital investments in our state park system.



Investments in Outdoor Recreation, Parks, and Trails: We support the allocation of \$25 million in Federal State Fiscal Recovery Funds (aka “ARPA”) for initiatives to “Enhance Outdoor Recreation and Visitor Experience” in FY 2023, in addition to new and already-approved funding as part of the Governor’s 2023 Budget Adjustments. For many years, Connecticut’s state park system has fallen behind on facility maintenance and repairs, and has experienced decreasing staff resources. It is good news to see Connecticut joining other states in directing federal recovery dollars to support outdoor recreation opportunities through investments in infrastructure projects at our state parks and forests. We were also pleased to see allocations to support urban park infrastructure in other sections of the Governor’s 2023 Budget Adjustments.

ARPA Funds for Land Conservation: If any additional ARPA funds are available, beyond those dedicated to the aforementioned priorities and other investments included in the 2023 Budget Adjustments, we respectfully ask that some of those dollars be allocated to support DEEP’s Open Space & Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA), which provides essential matching grants to municipalities, land trusts, and water companies to acquire land and conservation easements for open space and watershed land conservation.

Connecticut is not on track to meet its goal of conserving 21% of the state’s land base by 2023 and ranks at the bottom compared to other New England states in terms of combined state and federal per capita public funding of land conservation.¹ According to the CT Council on Environmental Quality’s 2020 annual report, to reach its share² of the 21%, the state would need to conserve 19,500 acres of land per year over three years, which we estimate would conservatively cost approximately \$136 million dollars. To put that in perspective, over the last 10 years, the state has conserved an average of 795 acres per year and, in 2020, invested ~\$2.8 million to acquire 1,614 acres in state land conservation efforts. If we are serious about reaching the state’s goal, investments in land conservation must be a top priority. Taking advantage of available ARPA funds to supplement existing funding for OSWA and other state land conservation programs would be a strong step in the right direction.

Personnel for DEEP: While it was also good news to see proposed personnel increases for DEEP, more details are needed to better understand where exactly those 53 positions are to be filled and whether they will result in a much-needed net gain in overall staffing. Budget cuts in previous years have significantly reduced personnel to support DEEP’s environmental and conservation programs. Working closely with our colleagues in the agency’s Land Acquisition and Management office, for example, we appreciate the challenges they face in implementing core programs that are essential to state and local land conservation efforts. With demand for programs like OSWA at an all-time high, coupled with anticipated increases in administration from existing and new federal programs, it is essential that DEEP has the capacity to fully realize the benefits of these funds.

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.

¹ Wildlands and Woodlands, “Public Conservation Funding in New England: Recent Trends in Government Spending on Land Conservation.”

² Per C.G.S Section 23-8b, of the 21%, the state is responsible for 10% and “others” (land trusts, municipalities and water companies) are responsible for 11%.