

CONNECTICUT
Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 6659
Appropriations Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
February 27, 2023

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 ~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. 6659, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor** (Governor's Biennial Budget) as it relates to CLCC's 2023 conservation funding priorities.

As a coalition organization, CLCC works with Connecticut's robust land trust community as well as DEEP, municipalities, and other entities committed to land conservation and addressing climate change at every level. CLCC was a member of the Governor's Council on Climate Change (GC3) Forests Sub-Group, a member of the Policy on Resilient Forests for Connecticut's Future (PRFCT Future) Working Group, and, most recently, a participant in the GC3 Resilient Infrastructure and Nature-based Solutions Working Group.

As we evaluate the Governor's Biennial Budget, 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 HB 6659:

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 Biennial Budget for operations and maintenance of our State Park System.

Investments in Trees and Forests: CLCC supports the allocation of \$500,000 of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars for "Climate Equity Urban Forestry" in FY 2024. Consistent with recommendations from the GC3 Phase I Report, this investment in tree planting and urban forestry will build upon DEEP grant programs that seek to address the significant inequities not only in where trees and greenspaces are located, but also in the associated health inequities for people living in our urban areas with the highest poverty rates. Heat-related stress coupled with poor urban air quality can pose major health risks to vulnerable groups, particularly those with preexisting health conditions. Urban trees and forests can improve air and water quality, mitigate the heat island effect, reduce flooding, shield people from ultraviolet radiation and mitigate against other negative effects of the changing climate.

Investments to Support Accessibility: CLCC supports the allocation of \$500,000 of ARPA funds for "Accessibility Equipment for State Parks" in FY 2024, which would allow DEEP to provide all-terrain wheelchairs for use by the public at state parks. All-terrain wheelchairs ensure that every wheelchair user or others with mobility challenges can explore the outdoors with little to no restriction. South Dakota, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota and Georgia offer all-terrain



wheelchairs to those with physical limitations. Connecticut has an opportunity to join these states as a leader in accessibility to ensure as many people as possible receive the benefits of nature and the outdoors. As with all new responsibilities for DEEP, we recognize that in addition to the investment in the equipment, the agency needs support for all elements of the program, including maintenance, storage, reservation system, etc., in order for it to be successful.

Personnel for DEEP: CLCC supports the proposed increases to DEEP's staff, including the budget proposal to hire additional employees to support programs and policies that advance environmental equity and justice. However, budget cuts in previous years coupled with a mass exodus of DEEP employees electing to retire have significantly reduced staffing for the agency's environmental and conservation programs, as well as 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 responsibilities.

- **Land Conservation:** Working closely with our colleagues in the agency's Land Acquisition and Management Unit (LAM), we appreciate the challenges they face 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 (OSWA) and other 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 five (5) additional staff with expertise in land conservation transactions and grant management.
- **State Parks System:** While CLCC supports the proposed addition of one Environmental Protection Operations Supervisor to the State Parks division, we contend that it is not enough to meet the needs of the State Parks system. As described in detail in the testimony of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) presented by Eric Hammerling, its executive director, the State Park system lost 41 full-time field positions over the past 20 years (and over 120 positions over the past 40 years) while attendance to State Parks continues to grow dramatically. In 2021 State Park attendance was reported to be over 17 million visitors, (the most ever recorded by DEEP and a 50% increase over the previous high.) One of the state's top tourism destinations, Connecticut State Parks are worth the investment. Outdoor recreation in Connecticut brings great value to our state -- generating \$3.9 billion in revenue and helping to sustain 44,065 jobs in 2021 (National Bureau of Economic Analysis - 2021 Report). CLCC aligns our requests with respect to State Park system staffing with those set forth in CFPA's testimony.
- **Inland Wetlands and Watercourses (IWW):** Wetlands are essential as wildlife habitat, key to water quality, flood prevention and vector disease control, and crucial to absorbing dangerous greenhouse gases. Given the rate at which wetlands have disappeared – staggering losses of up to 65% in Connecticut – and their critical ecological function, we must ensure that DEEP is well equipped to protect our remaining wetland resources to the greatest extent possible. Pursuant to the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act, DEEP's statutory responsibilities include providing training, regulatory and technical assistance to the state's 170 municipal inland wetland commissions and updating IWW regulations, reporting requirements, and model regulations. It is our understanding that currently there are NO staff at DEEP dedicated to the IWW program. We ask the Committee to consider a specific request of five (5) additional staff to ensure that the agency is able to uphold its important responsibilities in protecting these essential ecological resources.

Throughout the challenges of the past several years, the people across the state have turned to public and private open spaces, forests, and parks as a source of solace and relief. Never has the public's need for access to the outdoors been more important and impactful. This demand for open spaces, along with the essential role that land, water, and other natural resources play in addressing the impacts of climate change, underscores the critical need to generously invest in the staff, programs, and services that protect our environment, public health, and economic well-being.

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