

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 5296
Environment Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
March 14, 2022

Co-Chairs Cohen and Gresko, Vice-Chairs Slap and Palm, Ranking Members Miner and Harding, and members of the Environment 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 Connecticut's land conservation community.

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony in strong support of **House Bill No. 5296, An Act Concerning the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program** which would increase the bond authorization for the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA) to \$10 million.

Established in 1998 (CGS Section 7-131d to 7-131k, inclusive) and administered by CT DEEP, OSWA provides matching grants to municipalities, land trusts, and water companies ("conservation partners") for open space and watershed land conservation. Since its inception, OSWA has provided financial assistance for 619+ projects protecting over 41,000 acres throughout the state. OSWA includes the Urban Green and Community Garden Program, which has invested over \$1 million in financial assistance to targeted investment and/or distressed municipalities, for community garden and greenspace development projects.

Demand for OSWA is robust and funding for the program has never been more important:

Connecticut is not on track to meet its goal of conserving 21% of its land base by 2023.¹ According to the CT Council on Environmental Quality, to reach its ownership share² of the 21%, the state would need to conserve 19,500 acres of land per year over three years. To put that in perspective, over the last 10 years, the state has conserved an average of 795 acres per year. In 2020, it acquired 1,614 acres.³

With the state's land acquisition efforts significantly off target, conservation partners are critical to accelerating the pace of land conservation across Connecticut to help meet the 21% goal. OSWA funding is essential to their efforts.

By increasing the bond authorization for OSWA to \$10 million per year, HB 5296 would help meet the growing demand for OSWA as well as incentivize more land trusts and their communities to participate in the program.

¹The goal of conserving 21% of Connecticut's land base is set by CGS Section 23-8b. The Connecticut Comprehensive Open Space Acquisition Strategy (Green Plan) guides the efforts by DEEP and its land conservation partners to meet the 21% goal by 2023.

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

³ [2020 CEQ Annual Report](#)



It would bring much needed security and consistency to the program, including an opportunity to return to a semi-annual schedule of grant rounds, as required by the general statutes.⁴ Finally, there are several federal programs that land trusts may tap into as a source of match funds for OSWA. HB 5296 would help to ensure these federal match dollars are fully leveraged, allowing land trusts to protect thousands of additional acres of land.

Many of you have joined CLCC and our land trust and community hosts for our annual tours of properties protected with OSWA grants. You need only to step on the land, hike a trail or experience a community garden or park in the heart of an urban neighborhood to see and feel the value of greenspaces to communities across the state. We know that these 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.

Yet despite these and other benefits, Connecticut ranks at the bottom compared to other New England states in terms of combined state and federal per capita public funding of land conservation.⁵ If the state is serious about reaching its statutory goal, investments in land conservation must be a top priority. HB 5296 would be a step in the right direction.

We ask that the Committee approve the bill with a technical correction at the end of line 5 to add “per annum” after \$10 million.

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.

⁴ CGS Section 7-131e(a)

⁵ Wildlands and Woodlands, “Public Conservation Funding in New England: Recent Trends in Government Spending on Land Conservation.”