

CONNECTICUT
Land Conservation Council

Testimony on Senate Bill No. 887
Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
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Co-Chairs Fonfara and Scanlon, Vice-Chairs Moore, Kairos DeGraw, and Meskers, Ranking Members Martin and Cheeseman, and members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding 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. CLCC was a proud member of the Forests Sub-Group of the Working and Natural Lands Working Group of the Governor's Council on Climate Change (GC3).

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of CLCC in support of **Senate Bill No. 887, An Act Authorizing And Adjusting Bonds Of The State For Capital Improvements, Transportation And Other Purposes** (SB 887), as it relates to several of CLCC's priorities and GC3 recommendations with respect to investments in land conservation programs.

**Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA)
SB 887 Section 13(b)(1) and 32(b)(1)**

CLCC asks the Committee to support DEEP's requested level of \$10 million in bond funding for the OSWA program in both 2022 and 2023, an increase of \$5M per year from the Governor's Budget recommendation.

The Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program offers matching grants to municipalities, land trusts, and water companies for open space and watershed land conservation. Since its inception in 1998, OSWA has helped to protect 36,000 acres of land valuable for conservation, recreation, and agriculture in 139 CT municipalities. Maximum funding is 65% of the fair market value of the property (up to 75% for projects in distressed municipalities or targeted investment communities).

OSWA includes the Urban Green and Community Garden Program, which has provided over \$1 million in financial assistance to targeted investment and/or distressed municipalities, including Bridgeport, Hartford, Enfield, New Haven, Putnam, Norwalk, and New London, for community garden and greenspace development projects.



OSWA is the backbone of local land conservation efforts in the state. Demand for the program is robust. The 2020 OSWA grant round was the largest in the program's history, with 37 OSWA applications, totaling \$25 million in project costs, for which DEEP only had \$7.5 million to spend.

This significant shortfall in funding resulted in grant awards as low as 30% of the purchase price, with unexpected caps of \$400,000 per project – leaving many applicants scrambling to raise significantly more in match dollars than anticipated. For all applicants, but particularly for all-volunteer land trusts, this is a daunting task, especially when time is of the essence to close on transactions.

The land conservation community is actively assembling new projects in anticipation of the opening of the 2021 round – an announcement the agency has delayed due to the tenuous state of funding for the OSWA program. This delay coupled with the reduction in funding levels has left communities and landowners uncertain about the future of their projects, and the program as a whole, at a time when land conservation has never been more important.

The Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program (RNHT)

CLCC asks the Committee to support DEEP's requested level of \$10 million in bond funding for the RNHT program in both 2022 and 2023.

The RNHT program has enabled DEEP to conserve over 48,000 acres of land since 1986. Like the towns, land trusts, and water companies with which it partners, DEEP has a list of properties in the queue which it seeks for conservation, recreation, and wildlife management for the public benefit. According to the [DEEP 2019 Annual Report to the Environment Committee](#), the agency evaluated 50 properties covering over 4,200 acres eligible for State purchase through the RNHT program. The report goes on to state that there “are currently over 150 properties covering thousands of acres that have been reviewed and approved for acquisition, but DEEP lacks the funding necessary to acquire all available properties.” (DEEP Annual Report Page 5)

Despite the substantial need, and DEEP's request for \$10 million per year in bonding, the Governor's Budget does not recommend any funding for the RNHT program – leaving the opportunity to conserve high quality lands on the table, and possibly lost forever.

Connecticut Recreational Trails & Greenways Program SB 887 Section 61(a)

CLCC asks the Committee to support the Governor's Budget recommendation for \$3 Million per year for the Connecticut Recreational Trails Program (RTP).

A matching grants program, the RTP invested \$10 million since 2016 into over 60 municipal and nonprofit grants alongside multiple State Park and Forest projects in more than half of all communities across the state. RTP funding may be used for the construction of new trails; maintenance and restoration of existing trails; remediation of trails for accessibility by persons with disabilities; purchase/lease of trail construction and maintenance equipment; acquisition of land or easements for trails and trail corridors; and operation of

relevant outdoor educational programs. Unfortunately, all of the program's previously approved bonding is now expended.¹

In addition to the foregoing, CLCC asks the Committee to support the following bond authorizations:

State Park Infrastructure Investments. CLCC asks the Committee to support DEEP's requested level of \$41 million in 2022 and \$44 million in 2023 to fund alterations, renovations, and new construction at State Parks and other DEEP recreation facilities, including Americans with Disabilities Act improvements. SB 887 Section 21 (e) (1) includes zero funding for these purposes in 2022 and \$15 million in 2023. At a minimum, we ask the Committee to move the Governor's recommended level of funding to the first year of the biennium.

Resilience Bonding. CLCC asks the Committee to support the Governor's Budget recommendation of \$30M (Sections 13 and 32) for the biennium in microgrid and resilience bonding. The authorization of these bonds will help to fund adaptation and resilience programs and projects by municipalities, nonprofits, and academic institutions, including green infrastructure.

Throughout the challenges of this past year, people across the state have turned to public and private open spaces, forests, and parks as a source of solace. Never has the public's need for equitable access to the outdoors been more important and impactful. As recognized by the [GC3 Phase I Report](#) (and the nation's commitment to protect 30 percent of its land and ocean areas by 2030 [30x30]), this demand for open spaces, along with the essential role our natural resources play in addressing climate change, underscores the critical need to invest in the programs and projects 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.

¹ Note that with respect to implementing actions related to forest protection, the [GC3 Forests Sub-Group Report](#) recommends annual bond authorizations of \$25 million for OSWA and RNHT, respectively, and \$10 million for RTP, stating that typical bond authorizations ranging from \$3 - \$7.5 million per year have neither been consistent nor adequate to meet project demands. (GC3 Forests Sub-Group Report Page 47)