

CONNECTICUT
Land Conservation Council

Testimony on Senate Bill No. 980
Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
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Co-Chairs Fonfara and Horn, Vice-Chairs Miller, Moore, and Farrar, 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 Connecticut's land conservation community. I also have the honor of serving as Co-Chair of the State Natural Heritage, Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Review Board which provides oversight of DEEP's open space funding programs.

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of CLCC in strong support of **Senate Bill No. 980, An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State**, as it relates to several of CLCC's priorities and Governor's Council on Climate Change (GC3) recommendations with respect to investments in land conservation programs.

Connecticut is not on track to meet its open space goals. Established in 1997, Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) Section 23-8b requires the state to conserve 21% of its land base (673,210 acres). The Connecticut Comprehensive Open Space Acquisition Strategy (Green Plan) guides the effort to meet the 21% goal by 2023. Of the 21%, DEEP is responsible for 10% (320,576 acres) and "others" (land trusts, municipalities, and water companies, collectively "conservation partners") are responsible for 11% (352,634 acres).

As of the end of 2020, DEEP and the conservation partners held a combined 511,909 acres as public open space, or 76.04% towards achieving the total statewide goal. In 2021, those numbers increased slightly, with a combined 513,831 acres protected, or 76.33% of the goal. According to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), based on its average acquisition rate of 879 acres per year, it would take DEEP approximately 65 years to achieve its 10% share of the overall goal. ([CEQ 2021 Annual Report](#)) Based on other calculations, at the current rate of acquisition, it will take the state ~80 years to reach the overall 21% goal. If the state is serious about reaching its statutory goal, significantly increasing investments in the following programs must be a top priority.

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

CLCC asks the Committee to support the Governor's Budget recommendation of \$10 million in bond funding for the OSWA program in both 2024 and 2025. Established in 1998 (CGS Section 7-131d to 7-131k, inclusive) and administered by DEEP, OSWA provides matching grants to municipalities, land trusts, and water companies for open space and watershed land conservation. OSWA has invested \$137+ million to protect 38,000+ acres through 600+ land conservation partner projects across 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. With DEEP’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.

Approving the Governor’s recommended bond authorization for OSWA would help meet the growing demand for the program as well as incentivize more land trusts and their communities to participate. 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. (CGS Section 7-131e(a))

Finally, there are several federal programs that land trusts may tap into as a source of match dollars for OSWA – with funding levels expected to increase considerably thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Act. Approving the Governor’s recommended bond authorization for OSWA funding would help to ensure these federal match dollars are fully leveraged, allowing land trusts to protect thousands of additional acres of land.

Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program (RNHT) (Sections 2(f)(1) and 21(f)(1))

CLCC asks the Committee to support the Governor’s Budget recommendation of \$3 million in bond funding for the RNHT program in both 2024 and 2025. The RNHT program has enabled DEEP to conserve over 51,000 acres of land since 1986. Like the municipalities, 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 DEEP’s 2021 Annual Report to the Environment Committee, “[t]here are currently over 100 properties covering thousands of acres that have been reviewed and approved for acquisition. Statewide real estate transaction trends saw an increase in demand for property sales, especially lots in rural and suburban areas, favoring sellers and making State acquisitions of larger parcels for open space very competitive. Moreover, continued challenges presented by the COVID-19 virus pandemic presented challenges to the number of properties that could be purchased by DEEP.” ([DEEP Annual Report Page 5](#))

With this backlog of approved projects coupled with rising land values, DEEP’s need for RNHT funding is substantial. While not nearly enough to purchase all of the properties approved for acquisition – estimated at a total cost of approximately \$20 million – approval of the Governor’s Budget recommendation of \$3 million per year in bonding would allow the agency to move forward with some of the properties approved for acquisition.

Connecticut Recreational Trails & Greenways Program (RTP) (Section 62)

CLCC asks the Committee to support the Governor’s Budget recommendation for \$5 Million per year for RTP. RTP grant funds 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. As a matching grant program, it leverages investments from public and private sources into these important community projects.

The demand for RTP grant monies far exceeds the availability of funds, leaving many worthy projects tabled without financial assistance. This demand continues to increase. In 2021, DEEP received an unprecedented 65 RTP applications totaling over \$22 million in project costs, for which the agency had just \$3 million to spend. With 2022 grant proposals pending, we fully anticipate the level of need will completely deplete available funds.

Trails connect people to the land and to each other; they attract tourists to local businesses; they enhance property values; and they provide opportunities to stay physically and mentally healthy. With a growing demand for equitable access to the outdoors and an unprecedented increase in the public's use of trails – trends that are expected to continue – we ask the Committee to support this much needed level of investment into Connecticut's outdoor recreation infrastructure.

The foregoing programs are well worth the investment. Whether a land trust property, state park, forest or wildlife management area, you need only 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. In addition to attracting tourists and generating jobs, these lands are essential to addressing the worsening impacts of the changing climate, 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.^[1] Various GC3 and other working groups recommend annual bond authorizations for OSWA, RNHT and RTP at significantly higher levels (\$30 million, \$25 million and \$10 million respectively). Approving the Governor's Budget recommendations for these programs is a step in the right direction which we support.

CLCC also asks the Committee to support the following additional bond authorizations:

State Park Infrastructure Investments. CLCC asks the Committee to support the Governor's Budget recommendation for \$20 million per year (Sections 2(f)(2) and 21(f)(2)) to fund alterations, renovations, and new construction at State Parks and other DEEP recreation facilities, including Americans with Disabilities Act improvements.

Resilience Bonding. CLCC asks the Committee to support the Governor's Budget recommendation of \$30 million (Sections 13(b)(6) and 32(b)(6)) 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.

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."