

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 6482
Environment Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
January 30, 2023

Co-Chairs Lopes and Gresko, Vice-Chairs Hochadel and Palm, Ranking Members Harding and Callahan, 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 support of **House Bill No. 6482, An Act Authorizing Bonding for Bikeways, Greenways and Recreational Trails.**

CLCC supports HB 6482 which would increase the bond authorization for CT DEEP's Recreational Trails and Greenways Grants Program (RTP) by \$3 million. This amount is consistent with the bonding level of \$3 million/year for the program recommended in both years of the Governor's Biennial Budget for FY 2022 – 2023.

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.

Why do we need this grant program? Just ask your local land trust and their community partners. When a land trust or municipality acquires land for conservation, it is not the end of the process; it is just the beginning. Land conservation is as much about the stewardship of the property as it is about acquiring and protecting it to begin with.

What does this mean? A lot of dirty work: implementing management plans to ensure a balance between protection of the land and its usage for public enjoyment; grooming existing trails, constructing new ones, maintaining structures, and ensuring that the land is as accessible as possible for all to enjoy. And every land trust will tell you that it is worth it.

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.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments, and for all you do. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

