

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 6483
Environment Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
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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. 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 in support of **House Bill No. 6483, 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. 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:

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 efforts by DEEP and its land conservation partners 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 together held a combined 511,909 acres as public open space, or 76.04% towards achieving the total statewide open space acquisition goal. In 2021, those numbers increased slightly, with a combined 513,831 acres protected, or 76.33% of the goal. According to CEQ, based on its average acquisition rate of 879 acres per year, it would take DEEP approximately 65 years to achieve the ten percent goal. ([CEQ 2021 Annual Report](#))



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.

Increasing the annual bond authorization for the program would help meet the growing demand for OSWA as well as incentivize more land trusts and their communities to participate in the program. It would bring much needed security and consistency to the program, including a much needed 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 funds for OSWA – with funding levels expected to increase considerably thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Act . Increasing OSWA funding 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.¹ If the state is serious about reaching its statutory goal, significantly increasing investments in land conservation must be a top priority. How much of an investment? Various Governor's Council on Climate Change working groups recommend increasing annual bond authorizations for OSWA to \$30 million a year.

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 to ensure annual bond authorizations of at least \$10 million for the OSWA program.

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."