

CONNECTICUT  
Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 5032  
Appropriations Committee  
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director  
February 20, 2026

Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice-Chairs Hartley, Kushner, Exum, and Paris, Ranking Members Somers and Nuccio, and members of the Appropriations Committee:

*The Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) is the state's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, including its ~117 land trusts. CLCC is a 501(c)(3) organization operating statewide. Our mission is to elevate and strengthen land conservation in Connecticut. I also have the honor of serving as Chair of the State Natural Heritage, Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Review Board, which provides oversight of DEEP's open space and urban greenspace funding programs.*

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of CLCC regarding **House Bill No. 5032, An Act Adjusting The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June 30, 2027** ("Governor's FY 27 Budget Adjustments"), as it relates to CLCC's 2026 conservation priorities to strengthen state land conservation funding and program administration.

**Request for Additional Personnel for DEEP Land Acquisition and Management Office (LAM)**

CLCC requests that the Appropriations Committee add funding for two additional LAM positions (Environmental Analyst and Surveyor) to support Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition (OSWA) and Urban Green and Community Garden (UGCG) grant programs as part of the Governor's FY 27 Budget Adjustments.

With DEEP being the state's largest landowner, LAM is entrusted to manage over 260,000 acres of state lands and numerous conservation easements—billion-dollar assets bringing a myriad of environmental, social, and economic benefits to the state. LAM also administers core land conservation funding programs, including OSWA and UGCG, which are essential to local land conservation and urban greenspace restoration efforts. Despite these vast responsibilities, LAM operates with only six (6) employees, down from 11 staff in 2008.

**OSWA and UGCG Provide Vital Conservation Funding to CT Communities:**

OSWA is the main source of state funding that enables municipalities, land trusts, and water companies to purchase forests, farmland, and other open space for permanent conservation. Funded through bonding and the Community Investment Act, OSWA has invested more than \$158 million in 660 projects since the program's inception in 1998, assisting partners in protecting more than 44,000+ acres across the state that



are valuable for passive recreation, forestry, wildlife conservation, water quality, and local agricultural heritage. As a matching grant program, OSWA has leveraged millions of dollars in public and private investments, underscoring the value of public-private partnerships to the state’s land conservation efforts.

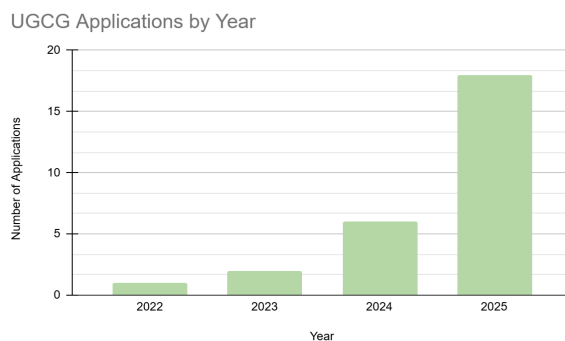
UGCG provides funding to municipalities and non-profit organizations in targeted, distressed, and environmental justice (EJ) communities to create, enhance, or restore urban greenspaces or community gardens for locally grown food, public enjoyment, environmental education, and other important public health and environmental benefits. Since 2007, UGCG has helped 22 municipalities with \$3.4 million in funding assistance to complete 50 projects, including the installation of new plantings, community gardens, access paths, rain gardens, bioswales, and other enhancements to urban green spaces.

### **Demand for OSWA and UGCG is Growing:**

Demand for both programs is rising, in large part due to the legislature’s continued investment of bonding and CIA funds, and its approval of statutory enhancements to OSWA and UGCG, which include:

- Providing clarity on how an OSWA applicant may effectively combine OSWA grants with federal, municipal, and private match funding to purchase open space or conservation easements, including guidelines for the timing and order of the recording of OSWA and other required easements. (PA 23-196)
- Expanding eligibility for UGCG to include nonprofits in eligible communities and adding EJ communities to that list. (PA 24-69)
- Allowing some of the funds to be used for due diligence expenses for applicants in targeted, distressed, and EJ communities to incentivize greater land conservation and urban greenspace projects. (PA 24-69)
- Clarifying that UGCG funds may be used to repurpose eligible sites for urban agricultural use. (PA 25-125)

These statutory changes have not only increased grant processing efficiency but also expanded access to both programs, driving steady increases in demand from a wider pool of applicants. The UGCG numbers from the past two years are especially telling: In 2022, LAM received one UGCG application, which was awarded \$48,875. In 2023, two UGCG applications received \$343,015. The 2024 round of applications, submitted by two municipalities and four nonprofit organizations, was awarded more than \$725,000, including funds for projects in Danbury, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, Preston, and Vernon. In the most recent round of UGCG applications received in December 2025, DEEP received a record 18 eligible applications totaling \$3.2+ million in funding requests.



## **Investment in OSWA and UGCG is Consistent with State Policy:**

Increases in demand for OSWA and UGCG come when state policy requires the integration and advancement of nature-based solutions as part of the state's comprehensive strategy to address climate impacts and biodiversity loss. Forests and trees, wetlands, healthy organic soils, riparian buffers, urban greenspaces, and other natural ecosystems protected through OSWA and UGCG projects are among our most potent defenses against the impacts of climate change. The myriad benefits of these nature-based solutions for public health, the economy, and the environment include reducing flood risk and impacts, filtering pollutants from the air, and absorbing and storing carbon. These same ecosystems are also critical to protecting biodiversity.

In conclusion, by adding two staff to LAM, DEEP can expect continued efficiency gains, reduced project turnaround times, and decreased reliance on costly contracted surveying services. This additional support for LAM will also enable DEEP to meet its statutory mandate (CGS Section 7-131e(a)) to offer two grant rounds per year, which is essential as demand for the program continues to increase.

### **Request for Additional Personnel for Department of Agriculture for Land Access**

CLCC aligns with the request from the American Farmland Trust/Working Lands Alliance for two dedicated staff positions at the Department of Agriculture to operationalize the Farmland Access Grant Program. Established in 2025 (PA 25-141), the program will provide direct financial assistance to land trusts, new, beginning, and historically marginalized farmers, and other tools to increase opportunities for farmland access. Although the program was funded through a bond authorization, it remains non-operational because the Department of Agriculture lacks dedicated staff to implement it. CLCC joins farmers and farmland preservation advocates in requesting appropriations to staff this new program.

### **Continued Protection of Community Investment Act**

CLCC is grateful to the Governor and Connecticut General Assembly for continuing to protect the integrity and full funding of the Community Investment Act (CIA) account, which provides a consistent source of dedicated revenue outside of the budget for investments in open space (OSWA and UGCG), farmland/dairy support, historic properties, and affordable housing programs in communities across the state. The CIA has a proven track record of success: Since its inception in 2005, it has generated approximately \$20 million annually and invested over \$159 million in more than 1,900 projects across all sectors. This investment has leveraged millions more in private and public funding, delivering significant benefits to the economy, the environment, and overall quality of life in every town across Connecticut. Thank you for your continued support for this vital source of funding.

At a time of uncertainty about federal support and growing environmental challenges, it is essential that the state increase investments in personnel, programs, and services to safeguard our natural and working lands, public health, and economic prosperity.

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.