

CONNECTICUT
Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 5153, Sections 1 and 2
Environment Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
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Co-Chairs Lopes and Parker, Vice-Chairs Hochadel and Bumgardner, 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 ~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 in support of **HB 5153, An Act Concerning Minor Revisions To Department Of Energy And Environmental Protection Related Statutes**. CLCC's testimony is limited to Sections 1 and 2 of the bill, which include DEEP's proposed minor but important amendments to the Open Space & Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA) statute (Connecticut General Statutes Sections 7-131d to 7-131k, inclusive), which we strongly support.

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 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.

OSWA includes the Urban Green and Community Garden Program (UGCG), which provides funding for 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 community enhancements.

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 recent 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

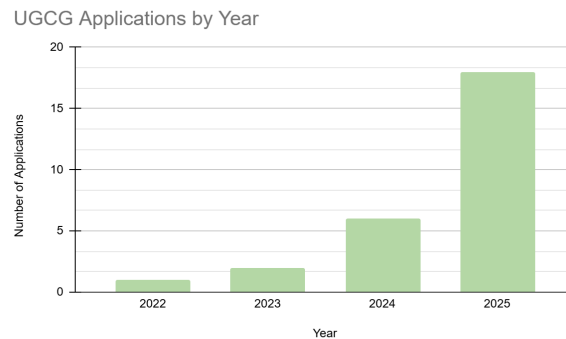


guidelines for the timing and order of the recording of OSWA and other required easements. (PA 23-196)

- 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.



Building off of the success of these recent statute changes, Sections 1 and 2 of HB 5153 aim to enhance the OSWA and UGCG programs for applicants: Section 1 would amend CGS Sec. 7-131d(c) to make the UGCG grant program more accessible and equitable allowing areas adjacent to Environmental Justice Census Block groups (areas serving those communities) to qualify for the program. Section 2 would address an important administrative issue of CGS Sec. 7-131g(c) by allowing OSWA projects that close early according to approved processes to have conservation language in the deed, as long as the deed is subordinated to DEEP’s easement.

We strongly support these amendments and commend CT DEEP for its ongoing commitment to enhancing the efficiency of the grant process and expanding eligibility, so that more people in more communities can experience the benefits of Connecticut’s natural and working lands.

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.