

**Natural Heritage, Open Space, and Watershed Land Acquisition  
Review Board**

Regular Meeting (via Zoom/teleconference)

March 11, 2021

Minutes

**Board members present:** Tim Abbott, Karen Burnaska, Eric Hammerling (Co-Chair), Walker Holmes, Dan Morley, Amy Paterson (Co-Chair), Elanah Sherman, John Triana, Joe Welsh (All by Zoom, except for Elanah, who attended by phone.)

**Guest:** Catherine Rawson

**DEEP representatives:** Alyson Clarke, Nicole Lugli,

**Welcome and Introductions**

The meeting was called to order at 10:32 AM.

**Approval of Minutes of January 14 and February 11 Meetings of the Review Board**

Changes: Regarding the 2/11 Minutes, substitute \$7,000,000 in unallocated bonding for \$15,000,000; delete “preapproved.”

On a motion by John, seconded by Amy, the Minutes were unanimously approved, as amended.

**DEEP Staff Updates**

Status of 2020 OSWA Grant Awards:

Nicole reported that Deputy Commissioner Trumble participated last month in a meeting to complete final selection.

Status of 2021 OSWA Grant Round:

Nicole said the round has not yet been announced.

Status of Public Comment Period and Input on OSWA and UGCG Applications:

Nicole said the period should commence imminently, perhaps as early as next week. DEEP will encourage comment on application forms, as well as the GC3 recommendations. Eric suggested that the period be as short as defensible; Amy recapped established comment topics: funding levels, consistency, equity, climate change, and timeliness. In an aside, Tim cautioned that funding levels are currently so low that applicants may go elsewhere.

**Old Business**

Preparation of Connecticut’s 2021-2025 Green Plan:

Nicole stated there is no news to report.

## **New Business**

### Update on Land Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and Highlands Funding for Connecticut

#### *LWCF presentation by Walker:*

Walker's presentation was accompanied by slides, which she said she would email to Review Board members after the meeting.

The LWCF is the most significant federal conservation funding. It does not use taxpayer dollars; rather, it is funded by federal oil and gas leases held on the Outer Continental Shelf. Since 1965, Connecticut has received \$133,000,000, with \$9,500,000 of that amount in the last five years. In 2021, Connecticut will receive \$4,300,000, and can expect at least this amount every year.

Monies from the Fund are divided into federal and state use. Federal beneficiaries are the national parks, national wildlife refuges, national forests, and the Bureau of Land Management; state beneficiaries are state and local governments, CT Forest Legacy Program, Highlands projects, and Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership projects.

In order to receive an allocation from LWCF, a state must have a current Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), and the funding must conform to the guidelines in that plan. In addition, funded lands must be perpetually open to the public. Funding may go toward acquisition, development, a combination of the former two, and planning; a percentage may also be used for administrative purposes. Allocations must be used within three years, or will revert to the federal government.

A 50% non-federal match is required. Private and in-kind sources may be part of a match. LWCF monies could go toward funding OSWA and UGCG projects, but only for those with local governmental applicants. (In other words, land trusts would not be eligible, although possibly a municipal/land trust partnership would be permitted.)

Amy and Walker expressed concern that the availability of this funding for OSWA and UGCG projects could lessen the perceived need for healthy bond allocations.

*Highlands presentation by Tim:*

As mentioned above, Highlands is one of the four “buckets” Connecticut receives from LWCF. Connecticut has received Highlands funding four times. Highlands monies go directly to DEEP for competitive funding in 29 towns. Towns must demonstrate high conservation value in order to qualify. The funding may be used to cover 50% of due diligence costs.

U.S. Senator Chris Murphy will be introducing new legislation that doubles the total national allocation from \$10,000,000 to \$20,000,000. Among other new elements in this proposed legislation: It would allow states to petition Fish and Wildlife to change Highlands boundaries; it would permit use of best available data rather than require whole new studies; it would create greater opportunity for more communities to participate by expanding eligibility and allowing more and different public/private partnership configurations.

Tim reported that Connecticut is outperforming every other state in Highlands funding, with the State currently sitting on a significant amount of Highlands money. He cautioned that Connecticut must use this funding in order to receive more. Right now, there is more Highlands money available than there are projects.

Tim added that DEEP is doing a good job of allocating Highlands funding, especially considering the significant administrative burden of doing so. (A small amount of Connecticut’s current Highlands funding, about \$300,000, may be applied toward administrative needs.) He said he shares the concern that availability of Highlands funding has the potential to reduce State allocations.

Tim volunteered the expertise of the Connecticut State Committee of the Highlands Coalition to anyone seeking information on eligibility.

2021 Legislative Update (HB 6441, HB 6577, SB 887, others):

HB 6441 (An Act Concerning Climate Change Mitigation) – Amy reported that the Bill’s hearing was last Monday. Section 3 includes the municipal funding option, which would create the opportunity for municipalities to establish a conveyance fee for funding multiple kinds of environmentally sound projects. This Bill reflects recommendations put forward by the Governor’s Council on Climate Change.

HB 6577 – (An Act Concerning the State Properties Review Board) - Eric reported that this Bill proposes to expand the purview of the State Properties Review Board, an expansion that would extend to DEEP programs, possibly

including OSWA. He stated that this enhanced authority would inevitably slow down processes, making program functioning essentially unworkable. Both DEEP and DAS submitted testimony in opposition.

SB 887 (An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements, Transportation, and Other Purposes) – Amy reported that this Bill includes the following bonding requests: \$10,000,000 for OSWA; \$10,000,000 for Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program; and \$3,000,000 for Recreational Trails Program. No public hearing date yet set, but a hearing will likely occur soon.

Other:

Environment Committee - Karen extended congratulations to Joe Gresko on being appointed Co-Chair of the Environment Committee.

SCORP - Eric said he will follow up with DEEP on the SCORP process. He encouraged Review Board members to volunteer. The DEEP contact person is Mike Lambert. Elanah said she would volunteer to provide ADA guidance.

**Adjournment:**

With no motions, the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 11:57 AM.

Respectfully submitted, Elanah Sherman, Secretary

**Next meeting: Thursday, April 8, 2021, 10:30 AM – 12 :00 PM**