

Statement of THE **CEPA** WORKING GROUP
**Audubon CT; CT Assn of Conservation and Inland Wetlands
Commissions; CT Forest and Park Association; CT Fund for the
Environment – Save the Sound; CT Land Conservation Council; CT
League of Conservation Voters; Rivers Alliance of CT**

Before the GAE Committee
March 16, 2007

**In Support of HB 5249 to Require Environmental Reviews of
State Lands Before They are Sold or Transferred.**

- The state spends millions of dollars acquiring open space, but **there are insufficient procedures in place to adequately consider the natural, open space and recreational value of the lands the state is selling and giving away.**
- This bill will ensure that before the state sells or gives away state land with valuable natural and recreational resources, **the Commissioner of Environmental Protection will develop a procedure to study the land and to make recommendations as to whether and how all or a portion of the natural, open space and recreational resources should be preserved.** The law also requires that notice of all land transfers by state agencies, along with any reviews performed by the Commissioner, be publicly noticed with an opportunity for public comment.
- **The need for such a review has been made evident by transactions where a more thorough and open environmental review would have better protected the public interest.** In 2000, a transfer of river front property to New Hartford ultimately led to a manufacturing facility in an official wild and scenic area on the Farmington River. Moreover, in the recent transfers of Fairfield Hills and Norwich State Hospital, serious questions were raised as to the quality, thoroughness and openness of the environmental review.
- Pressures to sell and develop precious state lands will only increase as time goes on. For example, the stunning 1,600 acre Southbury Training School has been on the verge of closing for many years. It is contiguous to valuable open space, close to the national Audubon Society's famous Bent of the River Bird Preserve and includes 500 acres of farmland, approximately 900 acres of wooded land and camping land and important water resources. **When the Southbury Training School is closed, it is critical that a full, meaningful and publicly open review of the property be done before a final decision is made as to its disposition.**
- **The state should fully understand the natural resource, open space and recreational value of state lands before such lands are sold or given away.**

(Please see reverse for Hartford Courant Op Ed)

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The Hartford Courant.

by JAMES F. SPALLONE

Keep An Eye On State Land

May 2, 2006

Open space preservation is an essential part of any meaningful strategy to protect Connecticut's environment and our quality of life. The state's open space purchase programs have preserved land in more than 125 Connecticut towns in the last decade.

Equally important, however, is protecting the open space that the state already owns. In addition to purchasing large blocks of prime open space, the state is also a major seller of properties, often at well below market value. Unfortunately, the state often sells public lands with insufficient environmental review and no public discussion. This was revealed recently by the sales of Fairfield Hills Hospital in Newtown and Norwich State Hospital in Preston, the latter of which involved selling hundreds of acres for exactly \$1.

In both of these cases, serious questions were raised about the thoroughness of the state's review of natural resources on the property. Although the Connecticut Environmental Policy Act requires a public review of state actions that could significantly affect the environment, including acquisition and development of land, the state agencies have refused to undertake such reviews for major open space sales.

Pressures to sell and develop precious state lands will only increase over time. For example, the Southbury Training School, which has a remarkable 1,600 acre property, has been on the verge of closing for many years. The recent termination of a long-standing consent decree concerning the school could hasten this process. The property includes 500 acres of farmland with barns, approximately 900 acres of wooded land and camping land, an important brook, a small lake, a drinking water aquifer and a large campus. Such assets should not be carved up for development without a meaningful public discussion about important environmental and recreational assets.

A bill pending before the General Assembly . . . would mandate public notice of all state land sales. The bill would also require the state Department of Environmental Protection to study and assess the open space and recreational resources on significant sites, and make the study available to the public before such sites are sold or otherwise transferred. This is a simple, common-sense solution to a critical problem.

Comprehensive, public review of state lands before they are sold is not just sound environmental policy; it's good fiscal policy.

State land is not the property of state agencies. It is the taxpayers' property. The governor, the Office of Policy and Management and the General Assembly should seize this important opportunity to build a system to make better and more informed decisions that will shape the state's landscape and identity for decades and even centuries to come.

James F. Spallone, a Democrat, is the state representative for the 36th District, which includes the towns of Chester, Deep River, Essex and Haddam.