

**STATEMENT FOR THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
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By the Groton Open Space Association (GOSA), P.O. Box 9187, Groton, CT 06340

Dear Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Groton Open Space Association has been working to protect and preserve open space in Groton for over 30 years. Over the decades we have come to appreciate the critical importance of the Department of Environmental Protection in assisting local communities in preserving open space, a fast dwindling commodity in many, many towns across the state, including ours.

We are writing today to urge you to reconsider the deep cuts in the DEP budget being proposed by Governor Rell. Her proposed budget (Bill 6371) cuts 24 positions from DEP, all of them currently vacant. Since 1991, the number of DEP positions funded by the state's General Fund has been cut almost in half while its workload has grown considerably. The DEP cannot afford further cuts and provide its essential services for the environment, such as critical reviews of major controversial development projects. DEP's maintenance in state parks is already woefully inadequate. Over the years DEP has tried to limit the actual staff reductions in the face of significantly increased responsibilities by paying for these through dedicated special funds. Unfortunately, the DEP has been responsible for paying for the high cost of benefits for these positions over the years instead of having them covered by the general fund, threatening the department with severe future shortfalls. Thankfully, Governor Rell's budget fixes this problem. The Governor's proposal shifts all positions currently funded by dedicated special funds back to the state's General Fund. The important message for the Appropriations Committee, however, is that DEP performs essential services for our communities, and that it already has too few staff to do its jobs.

GOSA also is strongly opposed to the proposed elimination of the Council on Environmental Quality. The budget for this small and effective agency is already very small, and moving CEQ to DEP would not produce significant savings but would seriously damage its effectiveness. CEQ plays a critical role as an independent watchdog across the state. If its functions are moved to DEP, that critical independence will likely be lost. We need CEQ's independent voice to continue to review state funded projects for consistency with environmental standards, to propose and review environmental legislation, and to act as an ombudsman for citizens, towns, legislators and others who are struggling with environmental issues.

Thank you for considering these views in your deliberations.

Sincerely,


Priscilla Pratt, President
Groton Open Space Association, Inc.

