

South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority
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Testimony to the Environment Committee

Raised Bill 6660, An Act Authorizing Bonds of the State for Various State Grant Programs and Concerning the Face of Connecticut Steering Committee

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The South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority is a non-profit, public corporation and political subdivision of the State. Within the 20 member towns of our water district, we own and operate a public water system, which includes 18 reservoirs, 4 surface water treatment plants and 7 ground water treatment plants. We serve over 427,000 water consumers approximately 53 million gallons of water per day and provide fire protection throughout our service area. The source of this water is a system of watershed and aquifer areas that cover about 120 square miles within 24 municipalities. Over 27,000 acres of these watershed and aquifer areas are protected as open space as a result of the Authority's efforts while an additional 900 acres are protected with a conservation easement.

The Regional Water Authority would like to thank the Environment Committee for the opportunity to provide comments on Sections 2 and 3 of Raised Bill 6660, *An Act Authorizing Bonds of the State for Various State Grant Programs and Concerning the Face of Connecticut Steering Committee*. The Face of Connecticut defines the character of our communities and our quality of life. Connecticut's quality of life is enriched by the quality of the water we drink and the resources we have to provide a safe environment through fire protection. The State of Connecticut is fortunate to have several existing programs in place that provide appropriate funding to ensure this quality of life.

The Face of Connecticut Steering Committee, created during the 2008 session, is the subject of Section 2 of Raised Bill 6660. The purpose of the Steering Committee was to fill existing gaps with new programs necessary to preserve our state's character as well as to manage and distribute funds for multi-purpose projects of special significance. Because funding for any programs beyond the existing programs was not available, there was limited ability for the Steering Committee to begin its work. However, now is the time for the Steering Committee to work together with members of the Face of Connecticut Coalition to provide the structure needed for its success, once additional funding is possible.

For the last 10 years, the Department of Environmental Protection, municipalities, water companies and nonprofit land conservation organizations have worked together toward reaching the State's goal of 21% of the state's land being preserved as open space by the year 2023 in state, municipal, private nonprofit, water utility and federal ownership (CGS 23-8(b)). Several of the requirements for the Steering Committee contained in subsection (d) on lines 84 to 97 would be helpful in determining the progress toward reaching that goal and determining what needs to be done to make the goal a reality. Rather than eliminate the Steering Committee now, as the Governor has proposed, when it is all volunteered time with no expense to the state, we would suggest it is indeed the time for the Committee to provide assistance to the state in reaching its goal. The Regional Water Authority would be pleased to assist the Committee and the Face Coalition to refine the list in Section 2.

Even during troubling economic times -- and perhaps even more so during these times -- owners of undeveloped land will be trying to sell their land as a way to make up for lost income or savings.

When banks begin funding again, developers will be purchasing. Connecticut must make sure it positions itself now to ensure that Connecticut is the place that businesses want to grow and people want to live by continuing its funding of open space and watershed lands as they become available.

Section 3 of Raised Bill 6660 would provide, in part, \$32.5 million for the state's existing programs to preserve and protect Connecticut's natural resources. It is important to note that this is not a request for new money, but to continue the same funding as past years. Connecticut's Open Space and Watershed Acquisition Grant Program, administered by the Department of Environmental Protection, is one of those existing programs. The program funds municipal, land conservation group and water utility purchases of open space and watershed lands. We realize these are extremely difficult times for the state and there are significant decisions the legislature and Governor will have to make to balance the budget and to mitigate the increasing deficit. Often, however, this leads to eliminating programs that are really working, providing a significant benefit to the residents of the state and its economy and cannot be made up for in the future if curtailed. This would be the case if funding for the Open Space and Watershed Acquisition Grant Program is not provided. As we have learned, once land is sold for development, it is gone forever. It would be shortsighted to curtail this program and allow precious open space to be unnecessarily developed. An added benefit of funding open space is that in many cases it serves as an additional protection to water supplies from becoming contaminated.

The Regional Water Authority takes its stewardship of land very seriously. Land choice is an important decision confronting many towns across our 20-town region. What happens on land in terms of development can affect the quality of water supplies. Two years ago, the Authority announced its plans to purchase and protect some 3,000 acres of watershed land in the region to protect the public drinking water supply. Two weeks ago RWA bought its 14th parcel of land since announcing the land initiative. Conservation easements protect four other parcels. All the parcels are in the watersheds or aquifers of the Authority's existing or future supplies in the following communities: Bethany, Branford, Cheshire, Durham, East Haven, Guilford, Haddam, Hamden, Killingworth, Madison, North Branford and Woodbridge. These acquisitions were made possible because of grants from the State, partnerships with municipalities and land conservation groups, and grants from The Watershed Fund, as well as funds from RWA's budget that is supported by the rates paid by its water customers.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our comments on Raised Bill 6660. The Regional Water Authority looks forward to working with legislators and the Executive Branch to assure that authorized bonding for the 2009-11 biennial budget is maintained at the FY2008-09 level; and to assure that the Face of Connecticut Steering Committee is maintained.

Please contact Carlene Kulisch, Kulisch Consulting LLC, at 203-415-2359 or kulischconsulting@sbcglobal.net for further discussion about RWA's comments on Raised Bill 6660.