

Naubesatuck Watershed Council

Protecting the Natchaug, Mount Hope, and Fenton Rivers in Northeastern Connecticut



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TESTIMONY

March 16, 2009

RE: Opposition to SB 839
An Act Concerning Mergers and Consolidations of Various State Agencies

Good morning Committee Members:

I write to testify with grave concern regarding SB 839. This bill will negatively affect citizens across Connecticut in many ways, and I write specifically in regard to the impacts on the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ).

CEQ has provided a critical tool for the Naubesatuck Watershed Council as we strive to protect the rivers in the watershed draining to Mansfield Hollow (Lake Naubesatuck) in northeastern Connecticut. This watershed is also the source of water for the Willimantic Reservoir, and is the largest drinking water watershed in the state.

CEQ's importance been painfully clear during the recent expansion of the University of Connecticut as part of UConn 2000. Although the construction proceeded apace at that time, little seemed to be done to protect the resources we depend on.

Words of warning were sounded by numerous environmental groups. These words could not be heeded at the stage agencies, including the Department of Environmental Protection. Only CEQ was responsive and provided a forum for the numerous citizen complaints.

As we all know, the warnings were in vain, and the University eventually sucked all the water out of the Fenton River during a drought in 2005. I have included a photo of the entirely dry riverbed in this testimony in case you have forgotten the incident:



Although conditions across northeastern Connecticut were dry at the time, no other river looked like a cobblestone road. In response to this egregious mis-management, CEQ once again provided the only forum for citizen concerns. The public outcry to the dry riverbed appeared to finally force UConn and the public agencies to come up with a solution to the water management issues. I am sure we are all happy to say that no rivers were emptied during a similar drought in 2007.

The Fenton River had been sucked dry in previous years as well, with the previous event occurring in the late 1990s. At that time, the Mansfield Conservation Commission attempted to work with the University to remediate the situation, to no avail. It took tremendous public pressure and CEQs assistance, and a dry riverbed, in order for fundamental water management strategies to be implemented.

The Naubesatuck Watershed Council has worked with the state agencies during the afforded opportunities. For instance, we have provided comments as part of the public review of the UConn Water Supply Plan, which is rewritten every five years. We have continually noted the lack of sustainable planning in those plans. For example, these plans repeatedly—in the midst of the UConn 2000 building boom—allowed for no growth of population at all. It was only during our testimony at the CEQ in 2005 that this fact was noted seriously by a representative of the University, and the projections were finally revised.

In addition to providing the only outlet for citizen complaint, CEQ provides essential environmental analysis. For instance, they spearheaded the State's efforts at open space preservation, an effort that simply could not have been conducted by DEP alone. This is not simply an environmental issue, it is an economic one. Land protection is the water treatment method of choice by New York City, Boston, and most of the major cities in the world that have clean water. These cities recognize that it is fundamentally cheaper to preserve water quality than to treat polluted water. The land preservation efforts—and therefore the preservation of affordable drinking water—in our watershed have been occurring with large thanks due to CEQ.

These essential functions are necessary for a healthy foundation for all our lives. They will be lost if CEQ is subsumed under DEP. As past DEP commissioner Gina McCarthy herself noted, DEP will not be able to take on the additional tasks. In this time of budget crisis we should nurture the most cost effective programs we have. With its highly qualified volunteer board and exemplary track record, CEQ heads the list of cost effective organizations in the State. I urge you to maintain their independence.

Sincerely Yours,

Denise Burchsted
Executive Director
Naubesatuck Watershed Council