

Re: Raised Senate Bill 1196

Dear Senator Slossberg, Representative Morin, and esteemed members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

I am writing in opposition to Section 14 of Raised Bill 1196, An Act Concerning the Conveyance of Certain Parcels of State Land. Section 14 addresses a trade of lands in Haddam, one parcel of which is owned by the Department of Environmental Protection.

I am privileged to be a member of the Connecticut River Gateway Commission and defer to its Chairman, Melvin Woody, and staff, J.H. Torrance Downes, the task of offering testimony on behalf of the Commission. What I offer here are my own thoughts as to why the "land swap" described in Section 14 should not be approved by your Committee for consideration by the full Legislature.

First, there is the precedent such a swap would set for taking land out of conservation. It could have a chilling effect on not only donations of land to the DEP and conservation agencies, such as local land trusts, but also on the willingness of property owners to sell land at a reduced price for conservation purposes. It is well understood that it is the expectation that land placed under protection will be so protected in perpetuity. What property owner would donate or accept a reduced price for land if that certainty of protection were no longer there?

Second, there is the matter of the unequal values of the two parcels involved, both in dollars and in conservation value. Although appraisals would be conducted on both parcels, it is doubtful it would find the dollar values to be comparable allowing for the parcels to be judged as apples to apples, not as conservation land vs. developable land. The 87 acres were purchased just before the market slumped (2009) for less than \$500,000. The 17 acres were purchased by the State several years earlier, as land values were climbing, for approximately \$1,300,000.

Putting the dollar value of the parcels aside, one must also consider the conservation value of each parcel. The 87 acres would be added to a large section of the Cockaponset State Forest which is almost 16,000 acres in size. In other words, although the 87 acres might be home to wildlife and provide passive recreation opportunities, its conservation would not appreciably affect habitat and hiking opportunities. In contrast, the 17 acres overlooking the Connecticut River makes up a significant portion of the 43 acres of the three adjacent parcels owned by DEP. Its loss would have a significant impact. Furthermore, development on much of that 17 acres would be highly visible from the picturesque Connecticut River.

Third, the cart is before the horse. The Gateway Commission has been working for the past year with the Town of Haddam and the developer to develop a plan which would work for all parties involved, potentially protecting much of the 17 acres while providing for development on some of the parcel. I, as a resident in the Gateway Conservation Zone, recognize the need for economic development, and under the right circumstances would be in favor of a plan which balances economic needs and conservation. However, trading these lands now is premature, before such a compromise is outlined. This land swap is all about a developer's needs and ignores the fact the Connecticut River is a state treasure, indeed a national treasure.

There are other considerations, of course. I have been advised that Goodspeed is no longer a party to the swap. There is the fact that if the land were taken out of protection before Haddam has developed an appropriate plan for the area (its Town Plan of Conservation and Development calls for a Village District), a private developer could put up an industrial building as the land is currently zoned industrial. There is the fact most of the comments posted on-line to the various news articles regarding this swap have been by individuals opposed to it.

These are difficult economic times, indeed, but I ask that you not forget that once land is developed, it is developed forever. Conservation land lost is lost for all. Let us go forward but proceed deliberately, not with haste.

I thank you for your consideration.

Nancy Fischbach
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