CONNECTICUT
Land Conservation Council

Testimony of Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
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Co-Chairs Cassano, Gentile and Members of the Planning & Development Committee:

The Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) joins the Connecticut Forest & Park Association and a statewide coalition of organizations and municipalities in strongly supporting **SB No. 43, An Act Expanding the Recreational Land Use Act, S.B. No. 90, An Act Concerning the Recreational Land Use Act, and H.B. No. 5254, An Act Expanding the Recreational Land Use Act.** On behalf of CLCC and our members, I would like to thank you for raising these bills, the intent of which is to restore recreational liability protection for municipalities and related entities, and for this opportunity to represent our members' interests here today.

CLCC works with land trusts, town conservation and open space commissions, garden clubs and other organizations to help ensure Connecticut's natural resources are protected forever. We provide training, technical assistance and funding to ensure the long term strength and viability of the land trust and conservation community across the state; and, through this work, have had an opportunity to witness firsthand how critically important open space is to our communities.

We are so fortunate to have the State Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition grant program which has enabled land trusts and towns to protect forestland, farmland, and open space that otherwise would have been lost forever to development. The open space grant program – funded through bonding and the Community Investment Act account – has become the backbone of land conservation in our state. The CT DEP has given millions of dollars in grants to municipalities to help protect over 75,000 acres of open space for the public to enjoy – monies which have leveraged millions of matching municipal dollars in return. Indeed, even during these tumultuous economic times, residents have consistently voiced their support for land protection by approving open space bonding referenda at the polls.

The public is committed to protecting open space because of the obvious benefits that it provides. Land conservation provides us with opportunities to get outside and connect with our natural environment; to exercise; to recreate; and to just stay healthy. Protecting our forests and fields makes for a cleaner and healthier environment – it enhances our quality of life.

But especially in these tough economic times, we should also recognize the value that open space conservation contributes to our state's economy. Open space and farmland preservation help to increase the value of neighboring properties; bring patrons to local businesses; enable farmers to earn a living while also producing local food for Connecticut residents; and help keep people employed. In short, open space conservation makes our towns more attractive for people to live and for businesses to operate.

Yet despite these benefits and contrary to the public policy underscoring the tremendous investment made in land conservation at both the local and state level, municipalities are considering the closure of access to existing recreation areas out of mounting fear of liability -- thereby sending a message that the risks of liability from owning, operating and maintaining open space outweigh the benefits that these lands provide to us all.

CLCC therefore urges the Committee to support these bills which provide municipalities and municipal entities with the same protections from liability as private landowners in order to maintain recreational access to municipal lands; ensure consistent application and furtherance of policies - at every level of government - that encourage public recreation; and protect state investments of Open Space & Watershed Land Acquisition Program as well as other state grant and municipal funds used to protect open space.

Thank you for your consideration.