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Testimony of Sidney F. Van Zandt, Vice- President of the Groton Open Space Association

Legislation before the Environment Committee on March 2, 2012

R.B. 5262: An Act concerning the Preservation of Certain Trails and Areas for Equine Use. ---Oppose

My name is Sidney F. Van Zandt, Vice-President of the Groton Open Space Association, Inc. We were formed in 1967 to fight a major development in what is known now as Haley Farm State Park. We raised the Town's portion of a Town, State, and Federal Open Space Grant to save the Haley Farm with the help of the Ct. Forest & Park Association that acted as our umbrella organization to help in that fund drive. Two years later legislation was passed to form the Bluff Point Advisory Council to come up with the highest and best use of Bluff Point, then under extreme pressure of development. I was Co-Chair. After two years of fending off development the land was condemned by Gov. Meskill to protect this beautiful undeveloped peninsula for the citizens of the State of CT.

Haley Farm and Bluff Point are joined by a railroad bridge that brings the open space total to over 1000 acres. A Coastal Reserve bill was passed in 1970 to protect the area south of the parking area from extreme development.

The state maps of HF & BP dating 2004 had no mention of access for horses. Somewhere after that they were allowed. The best areas for horses would be on the fire road, but on Bluff Point, there is also a preserve area on the south eastern side of the peninsula that should be excluded from the horse trail area. There are many listed species birds such as plovers and oystercatchers especially on the eastern sand spit, and that spit should be posted during the nesting season for horses as well as dogs. The area of grass at the top of that beach is very narrow and the fragile grasses are the only thing protecting that long stretch of beach from eroding and traveling inland. It is my understanding that the US Fish & Wildlife Service is also monitoring the beach area. The Groton Shellfish Taskforce were concerned that the Poquonnock River where tons of shellfish are introduced for harvesting every year was having excess damage by riders riding their horses in that estuary.

The General Assembly established the Equine Advisory Council (EAC) in 2007 through P.A. 07-42. The EAC (which is comprised of representatives from the CT Horse Council, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) and CFPA) has compiled goals for equestrian use on public land. They are the ones who should come up with the plan for horses with appropriate guidelines and restrictions for Bluff Point and Haley Farm and the remaining parks on this list.

The Groton Open Space opposes this bill, R.B. 5262 because of the need to address protection of environmentally sensitive areas. Equestrians are still allowed to use these two parks, but it is hoped that the EAC will develop additional guidelines for each of the listed parks. We encourage the Committee to vote against R.B. 5262.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill.