



COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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TESTIMONY

DATE: March 16, 2012

PRESENTED TO: Environment Committee
Connecticut General Assembly

PRESENTED BY: Karl J. Wagener
Executive Director

SUBJECT: Raised Bill 347, An Act Concerning the State's Open Space Plan

The Council strongly recommends a favorable report of this bill, as it will go a long way, at virtually no cost, to correct some of the state's deficiencies in its approach to conserving land.

Five years ago, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) took an unusually proactive approach to conserving land for a specific purpose. The Department declared that the state needed to conserve more grassland habitat for those wildlife species that depend on grasslands. It searched for suitable parcels of land, and, in partnership with Massachusetts and the nonprofit Conservation Fund, it conserved several hundred acres that straddle the border with Massachusetts. A noteworthy success! Why doesn't Connecticut do this more often? We would need a plan with several critical components, and we do not have such a plan.

How This Bill Improves Land Conservation

Connecticut needs a strategy – for itself and its partners, which include municipalities, nonprofits and water companies – for identifying and conserving those lands which the public needs the most. Connecticut should know 1) what the highest conservation needs are, 2) what lands are *already* conserved that fulfill those needs, both geographically and functionally, 3) what types of land (and where) on which conservation efforts should be focused over the next five years, and 4) how much money will be needed. With such a plan, Connecticut could get land conservation moving again. The raised bill would create such a strategy for DEEP and its partners.

The raised bill would

- 1) improve several specific components of The Green Plan, with an emphasis on identifying priorities for conservation.
- 2) broaden DEEP's consultation on the plan to include municipalities and regional planning agencies,
- 3) require a report from DEEP on how the state could best create a dynamic registry of preserved lands. As a reminder to the Committee: the state has a statutory goal of preserving 21 percent of the state's land area; this goal includes the state and municipalities, nonprofit organizations, and water companies. We have no idea where we stand in relation to that goal, because there is no comprehensive inventory of preserved lands.)
- 4) require DEEP to work with other agencies that have custody of significant landholdings to identify parcels that should be conserved. This provision (subsection (d) of the bill) is an extremely low-cost approach to moving the state forward toward its goals at a time when preservation is at a standstill.

Suggestion

If the Committee elects to report this bill favorably with substitute language, we would also suggest eliminating the lines in the existing statute, in CGS Section 23-8, that establish specific goals for the years 1999 – 2002, for obvious reasons.

Background

Prior to 1997, the DEP had no plan for conserving land. That year, the General Assembly gave the Department a responsibility to prepare such a plan, which the DEP dubbed "The Green Plan." The DEP established a five-year cycle for updating the plan. The current version expires in 2012.

Most of the current Green Plan consists of descriptions of existing programs. There is a list of types of lands which, if offered to the DEP, would be given consideration. The plan is explicit in saying that this list is unranked; there is no identification of priorities. If you or a constituent want to see what the DEP has in mind for land conservation over the next five years, and how much money it needs to fulfill its objectives, you won't find it in The Green Plan.