

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony in Support of S.B. No. 842

To the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee

Submitted by: Amy Blaymore Paterson, Esq., Executive Director

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Senator Fonfara, Representative Widlitz, and members of the Committee:

Please accept this testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council in strong support of **Sections 13, 21 and 61 of H. B. No. 842: An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements, Transportation and Other Purposes**, which authorize bond funding to support critical state land conservation programs.

The Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) works with land trusts, other conservation and advocacy organizations, government entities and landowners to increase the pace, quality and scale of land conservation in Connecticut while assuring the perpetual, high quality stewardship of conserved lands in the state. As Connecticut's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, CLCC focuses on building land trust capacity and sustainability, leading a unified land conservation voice for public policies that support land conservation, and engaging broad constituencies to foster a deep understanding of the benefits and need for land conservation. CLCC is guided by a Steering Committee with statewide representation.

Status of Land Conservation in Connecticut

The state's goal to preserve 21-percent of Connecticut's land area or 633,210 acres by 2023 (the "21% goal") was created by the legislature in 1997, with recommendations that 10-percent be acquired by the state and 11-percent by "others" (land trusts, towns, and water authorities). However, based upon the state's estimate of the number of acres conserved to date, it is clear that the state will fall short of the 21% goal unless it makes a commitment to provide consistent funding for open space acquisition.

Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition (OSWLA) Program

S.B. 842, Section 13 provides for \$10 million in bond funding for the Department of Environmental Protection (DEEP) open space grant program. The OSWLA grant program is the only state matching grant program for land trusts, towns and water companies seeking to protect open space, forestland and farmland. Funded through bonding and the Community Investment Act (CIA), the OSWLA program provides for a grant which typically covers 50 percent of the purchase price for a property.

This program has supported the purchase of 380 properties totaling 24,352 acres in 120 communities since 1998 and continues to foster strong collaboration amongst state and local governments, land trusts and private landowners. The 2012 grants which were recently announced by Governor Malloy would permanently protect another 2,730 acres.

The state's investment in land acquisition through the OSWLA program has leveraged millions of matching municipal, federal and private dollars in return. Even during these years of

tumultuous economic times, residents have consistently approved open space bonding referenda at the polls and otherwise voiced their support for land protection.

Yet, despite the strong public support for land conservation, the OSWLA program has been cut back from two grant rounds to one per year, with no funding released for the program in 2009 and 2011. Furthermore, the level of OSWLA funding, which annually falls short of the needs of the program, is chronically threatened by attempts to siphon funds from the CIA account into the general fund or to fund unrelated programs. This reduction in the level and consistency of funding has seriously impacted the conservation community's efforts to acquire and protect land – at a time when land values are low and affordable. Indeed, CLCC is contacted on a regular basis by organizations, towns and landowners that, but for a lack of reliable funding, would be ready to move forward with conservation projects in their communities.

In a recent meeting with DEEP Commissioner Esty, he reiterated his desire and commitment to return to a predictable schedule of annual grant rounds – which would better enable towns and land trusts to strategically plan, effectively negotiate and budget annually for conservation transactions. The bonding authorized by Section 13 of S.B. 842 will not only enable Commissioner Esty to begin to follow-through on his commitment but will provide the state's conservation partners – its land trusts and towns – with the funding that they need to plan for and pursue high caliber conservation projects throughout the state.

Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program (RNHT)

S.B. 842, Section 21 authorizes \$10 million in bond funding for DEEP's RNHT Program – the agency's primary program for the acquisition and management of land for the state's system of parks, forests, wildlife and other natural open spaces. Consistent, annual funding through the RNHT program is critical to the state's ability to meet its own share (65,903 acres) of the 21% goal. Like the towns and land trusts with which it partners, DEEP also has a list of properties in the queue which it seeks for conservation purposes. The bond funding authorized by Section 21 of this bill will enable the agency to continue to move forward with its conservation priorities.

Farmland Preservation Program (FPP)

S.B. 842, Section 61 authorizes \$10 million in annual bond funding for the Department of Agriculture's (DoAg) FPP – which enables the agency to preserve farmland by acquiring development rights to agricultural properties. To date, the FPP has preserved over 40,000 acres constituting approximately 30% of DoAg's goal of preserving 130,000 acres. More than half of these acres are classified as prime and important farmland soils. As with the OSWLA grant program, the state's investment in the FPP has leveraged significant matching dollars.

In conclusion, the public is committed to protecting open space and farmland because of the obvious benefits such lands provide to our environment, our quality of life and our economy. To that end, we are grateful to Governor Malloy for recognizing the importance of continuing to fund these three important state programs, which are essential to the state's ability to meet its conservation goals and protect the resources that make our towns more attractive for people to live and for businesses to operate.

On behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council and our conservation partners in every town throughout the state, we respectfully urge the Commission to support Sections 13, 21 and 61 of S.B. 842, and thank you again for this opportunity to present our comments.