Testimony Re: Raised Bill No. 70
An Act Concerning the Preservation of Lands Under the Control of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the Department of Agriculture

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Dear Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding raised Bill 70.
I write on behalf of the Friends of CT State Parks, a statewide coalition of 22 individual Friends volunteer organizations with overall membership of 6900 people, all of whom are dedicated to sustaining and improving the Parks and Forests System.

The Friends strongly support raised Bill 70 which if adopted will classify the lands for which DEEP and DoAg are custodians as being "lands of high conservation value," unless otherwise designated by the agencies; it will also require that DEEP and DoAg Commissioners place conservation restrictions on deeds for those lands. Additionally, the legislation will initiate a long needed over haul of the Land Conveyance Bill process.

In recent years, a number of transfers of DEEP conservation properties, facilitated through the Land Conveyance Bill, have spotlighted the inadequacies of present safeguards. Lands that the vast majority of citizens have assumed to be protected in perpetuity have been proven to be disconcertedly vulnerable to transfer without oversight and hearing. Legislators through the Conveyance Act have sometimes sought to serve their particular communities and constituents at the expense of Connecticut's citizenry as a whole.

State conservation lands belong to all Connecticut's people. A bedrock precept upon which Connecticut's State Parks and Forest System was founded 100 years ago was that access to our most beautiful natural treasures would always be shared equally by all. The countless citizens, who over ten decades painstakingly secured these properties, very deliberately labored to honor this principle. Our conservation lands were not purchased or donated, and then maintained by generations, in order to benefit single municipalities or regions.

Simply because a state park or forest is contained within a town's boundaries does not mean it "belongs" to that town or that pieces may be carved out at will to promote local economic development, to further parochial goals, or to provide relief from a lack of adequate municipal resources. This all too common misconception, in

combination with a Land Conveyance process without adequate checks and balances, has led to subversion of the public will and an undermining of its long-term interests. No matter how advantageous to local needs, conservation land holdings should never loose preserved status, be repurposed, or transferred from state ownership without the well-informed consent of our citizens.

If arguments are to be made as to the merits of removing conservation lands from state care, any proposal should first be subject to vigorous DEEP review and then openly vetted by the public. DEEP already has strict guidelines in place for property review, but unfortunately that process has been sometimes circumvented. Legislation needs to assure that this process is unfailingly utilized and respected. The practice of last minute insertions of bill language regarding proposed land transfers without sufficient opportunity for public hearing and input is cynical, un-democratic and sign certain that the prospective transfer would never pass muster with the majority of citizens. In order to restore public faith in the integrity of land review processes, that practice should certainly cease.

Divestment of state park and forest lands is a matter of very great concern to our Friends organizations, not only because it is our stated mission to preserve these properties in perpetuity, but also because of the dramatically increasing investments our groups are making to enhance facilities and on occasion to purchase acreage for communal benefit. Our contributions are substantial. We donate 79,000 volunteer hours per year to buttress the system; these hours are conservatively valued at $2.2 million per annum. In addition to our labor, Friends contribute cash, goods and property. Since our first group's inception, our non-labor contributions total over $8 million.

Our gifts of time and money do come with a few strings attached; our expectation is that our contributions will not be wasted and that they will never be redirected for purposes other than those that benefit and service every Connecticut citizen visiting parks. Friends also expect that government will not decrease nor diminish the value of the very assets we work so hard to enhance.

The use of the Conveyance Bill to forcibly transfer state land without public review or DEEP oversight betrays citizens' trust and neutralizes so many people's best intentions. An undermining of those philanthropic impulses, so sorely needed in our straitened economy, is perhaps the most regrettable and damaging result of a non-transparent Conveyance process and an absence of unequivocal conservation classifications.

The Friends of CT State Parks strongly endorse raised Bill 70 and ask for the Environment Committee's leadership in strengthening legal protections for conservation properties and in helping assure that land review processes meet the high expectations of citizens.

Thank you very much for raising this bill for discussion.

Respectfully submitted,

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