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Testimony Regarding Governor's Bill No. 6824

Appropriations Committee

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

March 2, 2015

Co-Chairs Bye, Walker, and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) concerning Governor's Bill No. 6824, **An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2017.**

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.

CLCC submits this testimony on the Governor's Budget in connection with three conservation priorities:

1. Protection of DEEP, DoAg and other Programs Impacted by Proposed Sweep of Community Investment Act Funds
2. Managing and Protecting State Parks and Forests
3. Maintaining the Staffing and Independence of the Council on Environmental Quality

Budget Adjustments Requested to Offset Proposed Sweep of CIA Funds

While the budget contains \$10 million in bonding for the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEEP) open space matching grants program (Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program [OSWA]) and the Department of Agriculture's (DoAg) Farmland Preservation Program for each of the next two years, it proposes to virtually eliminate funding from the Community Investment Act (CIA), with DEEP's OSWA account most severely impacted by proposed CIA cuts in the current fiscal year.

The CIA was enacted to fund four specific land use programs which support the economy and create jobs. Enacted with tremendous bipartisan support in 2005 to address the social and environmental impacts of suburban sprawl, the CIA provides increased funding for state programs for open space, farmland/dairy production, historic properties and affordable housing.

Funded by a surcharge on recording fees, the impact of the CIA on the economic well-being and overall quality of life in our communities has exceeded all expectations. Virtually every town in Connecticut has benefited from the CIA. Since its enactment, the CIA has funded 894 projects, in 157 towns for a total of \$122.5 million invested in our communities.



Pursuant to SB No. 946 (Section 29b), the Governor proposes a complete sweep of funds deposited in the CIA account from January 1, 2016, until June 30, 2017 into the General Fund. An additional sweep of \$15.2 million from the CIA account is proposed for the current fiscal year as part of a deficit mitigation bill (HB 6825, section 5), including an additional \$10 million from DEEP's open space grant program. The magnitude of these cuts is unprecedented.

The CIA is critical to land conservation. The CIA is the only *consistent* source of funding for the state's OSWA program – the state's matching grant program for land trusts, towns and water companies seeking to conserve open space. Since its inception, the CIA has provided \$17,340,039 to support the acquisition of 4,447 acres and 16 community gardens. (DEEP 2013 Annual Report to the Environment Committee) The 2014 OSWA grants which were announced by Governor Malloy at the end of last year would permanently protect another 2,250 additional acres in 25 municipalities.

The CIA funding is essential to the viability of the OSWA program and the land conservation community's ability to help the state meet the statutory goal set forth in Connecticut General Statutes Section 23-8(b) of conserving 21% of the state lands, by the year 2023. Without funding from the CIA, the consistency and viability of the DEEP OSWA program will be seriously threatened. We strongly urge this Committee to take into account these unprecedented and far-reaching cuts when evaluating the overall budget for DEEP, DoAg and the other agencies that oversee CIA-funded programs.

Managing and Protecting State Parks and Forests

CLCC is committed to supporting DEEP's natural resources programs to ensure the proper stewardship, management and inventorying of state conservation lands. We are therefore extremely concerned that the proposed budget for DEEP's natural resources program, in particular the \$2 million cut to State Parks, would further devastate the department's already burdened ability to manage public lands and likely lead to the closure of several state parks around the state.

Like the CIA dollars, investments into our state parks reap tremendous economic benefits to the state in return. In an era when fiscal responsibility is said to be the foundation of good governance, it behooves the state to protect rather than raid, cut and eliminate the programs that have generated and will continue to leverage millions in public and private investments made in acquiring and protecting open space – particularly when those lands do so much to benefit both the quality of our lives and our state and local economies.

Other Cuts to DEEP's Budget Impacting Conservation

Additional proposed significant changes to DEEP's budget of concern to the land conservation community include the funding cuts for Conservation Districts and Soil and Water Councils. This budget cut would essentially eliminate the state match for a \$10 million federal grant recently awarded to the Conservation District and 7 other partners to fund a project to improve the health of Long Island Sound, including a component to institute a land protection program to protect agricultural and forestry areas. This project is one of more than 110 high-impact projects across all 50 states that will receive a portion of \$370+ million as part of the new USDA-NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program and will leverage at least a 1:1 match from participating partners.

Maintaining the independence of CEQ

CLCC opposes the recommendation in the Budget to transfer the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to the Joint Committee on Legislative Management (Office of Legislative Management) and eliminate its agency's funding.

Created in 1971, CEQ is the state's independent watch-dog agency that the public relies upon to, *inter alia*, monitor environmental progress, assess the efficacy of state environmental laws, policies and programs, and investigate alleged violations of environmental laws. Acting through its volunteer council and just two staff, with limited support from DEEP for administrative purposes only, CEQ provides the public with these services efficiently, effectively and at minimal cost (less than \$185,000/year) to the state. There is likely no other state agency that does so much for so little.

Without a comprehensive fiscal analysis, it is difficult to understand how any change in CEQ's current structure would result in any meaningful benefit to the state's budget or general operation. Indeed, it would not be surprising if this move would only serve to create unintended conflicts and administrative inefficiencies – with the public and the quality of our environment paying the price.

For these reasons, CLCC requests that the Committee support efforts to restore CEQ's funding under its current structure in order to best effectuate the agency's unique position of independence and assure its continued ability to carry out its mission on behalf of the public interest.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council and the state's conservation community in support of restoring and protecting funding to important conservation programs. We would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information about land conservation efforts in our state.