

Testimony of Ben A. Solnit, President, Morris Land Trust

Raised Senate Bill 347. An Act concerning the percentage of State and Federal Funds that may be used to open space under the open space and watershed acquisition program.

Strongly Support

The Morris Land Trust (MLT) is a local land trust founded in 2006. We operate with a volunteer board and have no staff. As of year end 2014, MLT holds 3 conservation easements on a total of 62 acres. Our 2014 income was \$12,710 and our assets totaled \$88,877.

We are currently working, in partnership with The Connecticut Farmland Trust (CFT), to acquire a conservation easement on most of the 138 acre Farnham Farm. The Farm has been owned by the same family since 1735 and includes fields, forests, stone walls, streams, wetlands, habitat for the endangered New England cottontail, and a portion of the Mattatuck Blue hiking trail. It is adjacent to public water supply watershed lands. The potential easement has been valued at \$600,000, and CFT and MLT applied for funding for its acquisition from both the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Both grants were approved, demonstrating the significant conservation value of the project. The grants are enough to fully fund the purchase of the easement.

If the 70% cap is not lifted, either the owner will have to forgo \$180,000 or CFT and MLT will have to raise those funds, which would be nearly impossible for us. Morris is a small town and most of its 2,300 residents are middle class. MLT's 2014 income of \$12,710 was a good year for us.

We already have a lot of skin in this game. MLT and CFT have already each paid \$4,900 for the appraisals necessary to NRCS and DEEP and we each expect to spend approximately \$7,600 for surveying and additional appraisal fees. There will also be a legal bill of unknown amount to pay. If MLT's legal fees are \$5,500, the total out-of-pocket cost to MLT of the Farnham Farm project would be \$18,000. Eighteen thousand dollars is more than 20% of our total assets and represents 150% of our income.

In addition, if the easement is acquired, we will have the permanent responsibility of monitoring and providing stewardship for the land. This will require a further significant expenditure of MLT's human and financial resources.

I urge you to repeal the cap and empower local land trusts to preserve our state's natural heritage for future generations. Thank you for your consideration.

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