

**Testimony re. SB 347  
given by Ginny Gingras  
21 Timber Lane, Vernon, CT  
at the Public Hearing  
Wednesday, February 4, 2015.**

On behalf of the Tolland County Agricultural Center (TAC), I am speaking to support S.B. No.347 AN ACT CONCERNING THE PERCENTAGE OF STATE AND FEDERAL FUNDS THAT MAY BE USED TO PURCHASE OPEN SPACE UNDER THE OPEN SPACE AND WATERSHED LAND ACQUISITION PROGRAM...and its impact on the preservation of the Gunther property, a 100 year old farm located in Vernon and Tolland. which TAC has been planning to acquire since 2011 with the guidance of the Connecticut Farmland Trust.

I am President of the 12 member Board of Trustees of TAC, a non-profit 501-c (3) organization. Its mission is to provide an environment for agricultural education, ecological landscape education, family studies and leadership education for people of all ages in Tolland County, Northern Connecticut and the Northeast. In 1956, Tolland County leaders in 4-H, homemaking and agricultural programs founded TAC as a non-profit, self-supporting organization. In 1957, the Town of Vernon agreed to sell a 32 acre tract of land that had previously been the Town Farm property to TAC. In order to finance the purchase, a small group of local farmers, most of whom were among the founders of the corporation, signed personal notes for the funds to purchase the property. In other words, they mortgaged their farms.

As a non-profit corporation, TAC is funded primarily through rental and usage fees for the use of its facilities, membership fees, and through rental of space for the winter storage of boats, campers and other recreational vehicles. Today, TAC rents office space and provides a service center for: Tolland County Cooperative Extension system which oversees all county 4-H programs, Consolidated Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, formerly Soil Conservation Service. Note: TAC is a unique entity –nothing like it exists in Connecticut.

The Gunther Farm is contiguous to the TAC property and when acquired, will be added to and managed as part of TAC's existing 32 acreage. The Gunther Farm includes a number of attributes that make it a high priority for preservation. Conserving this property:

1. Preserves 20+ acres (92% of the property) of Prime and Statewide Important Agricultural Soils. It also preserves an uncommon variety of soils for an uncommon variety of soils for a relatively small property.
2. Protects 16 +/- acres of grasslands (which are rapidly disappearing in CT) that can provide nesting habitat for the state's declining grassland bird species.
3. Adds to an expanding area of 900+ acres of protected private and public open space and farmland on the Tolland-Vernon line.
4. Preserves a family farm that has been in operation for more than 100 years.
5. Protects the flood plain of Gages Brook, which is the major headwater of the Tankerhoosen River in the Tankerhoosen Watershed.
6. Presents the only opportunity TAC has to expand its center – the remainder of the land abutting TAC is developed
7. Enables TAC to expand its existing environmental education programs as well as explore new programs.

The Conn. State Statute of 2008, Open Space Grant Program, which states that the amount of State and Federal Grants not exceed 70 % of the grants , known as the 30% rule, is an impediment to TAC's acceptance of the Gunther Property, which we just learned of this past week. We have been doing fundraising to provide for care and clean up the property which we have estimated to be \$150,000. Now we learn that we need to raise an additional \$210,000 as our share of the purchase price. We now face the obstacle of fund-raising in a short time frame due to the property owner's needs and health.

The 70% cap should be eliminated to enable organizations such as TAC to purchase property for the purpose stated above. The economic climate existing in our town and area makes fund raising very difficult. We will seek the assistance of a Profession Fund Raiser, but it is dubious that the money can be raised in time.

Thank you for the opportunity allowing me to present testimony on this important issue.

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