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Testimony Submitted: Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee

Submitted by: William Arnold, President

March 9, 2015

Co-Chairs Fonfara, Berger, and Members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the Kent Land Trust concerning Senate Bill No. 946, An Act Concerning Revenue Items to Implement the Governor's Budget.

KLT is a community-based, volunteer-led land trust operating in the northwest Connecticut town of Kent. Altogether we protect over 2,000 acres through conservation easements and properties we own and make available for public use.

The Kent Land Trust strongly opposes the Governor's proposed complete sweep of Community Investment Act funds in Section 29 of Senate Bill No. 946. As you know, the Community Investment Act (CIA) was enacted in 2005 with strong bipartisan support. It provides the only consistent source of funding for Connecticut's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition program (OSWA), administered by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. Land trusts across the state have been immensely successful in participating in the OSWA program as a way to leverage millions of dollars in federal and private funds in order to purchase and protect priority conservation lands for the public benefit.

Over the past decade, the CIA, funded through a \$40 surcharge in local recording fees, has provided over \$133M for 1,100 projects in 165 towns. The CIA makes worthwhile investments in not only open space protection but also farmland preservation and dairy support, historic preservation, and affordable housing. The CIA is a key source of reliable funding for the OSWA program. OSWA projects protect critical natural resources and make open space available for public recreation. Land trusts' OSWA projects all are publicly accessible. CIA investments boost local and state economies by contributing to the viability of the \$873M outdoor recreation industry and the \$3.5B agricultural industry.

KLT and the Kent community has benefitted from the OSWA program three times. In 2003, KLT purchased the 250-acre Skiff Mountain Preserve, in 2007 it purchased the 12-acre Rookery Preserve, and just last year, the 253-acre East Kent Hamlet Nature Preserve.

For these three projects KLT received a total of \$1,089,000 in OSWA funds and used this to leverage \$520,000 in federal Highlands grant funds and over \$2 million in private contributions. The land we protected is home to endangered and critical wildlife habitat, Class AA water, vernal pools, and unfragmented forest greenway corridor. The Preserves are popular for their hiking trails and are used by local schools for scientific research and education. All were closely aligned with the state's plans for open space protection, wildlife conservation, recreation and trails, climate change response, and have brought Connecticut closer to its stated goal to protect 21% of its land by the year 2023.

KLT's latest OSWA project, the East Kent Hamlet Nature Preserve, is one of our proudest achievements. Protecting this land, formerly known as the Girl Scouts' Camp Francis, had been a community priority for decades. With acreage in both Kent and the adjoining town of Warren, this property was one of the largest remaining undeveloped parcels in the area and as such commanded a high price of \$1.5M. With additional funds needed to clear the dilapidated camp buildings, the total project cost was \$1.75M. To leverage the \$500,000 OSWA grant we raised \$1.25 million using federal, town, foundation, and private contributions both large and small. The community was extremely supportive and engaged throughout the project and the private fundraising campaign was a great success. Still, given the purchase price, this project could not have been completed without the assistance of OWSA program.

The protection of the East Kent Hamlet Nature Preserve has catalyzed protection efforts throughout the entire West Aspetuck watershed. Thus the impact of this project continues to grow. Several properties within the watershed are protected outright or through easements but a few key ones are not. In the current grant round KLT has applied for OSWA funding to protect a 25 acre property upstream of the East Kent Hamlet Nature Preserve which contains critical wetlands within the watershed.

Please preserve the ability of the CIA program to meet state, federal, and local community priorities and goals for open space and public recreation. Please reverse the Governor's proposed sweep and restore funding to this critical and extremely successful program. This forward-thinking legislation is structured to provide dedicated funding for these worthwhile investments, so that project funding is not dependent on the vagaries of bond funding or general budget pressures. We need your full support to preserve the integrity of the Community Investment Act.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,



William Arnold
President

CC: Gov Dannel P. Malloy
Sen Clark Chapin
Rep Roberta Willis