S T A T E O F C O N N E C T I C U T
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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Office of the
Commissioner

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Public Hearing – February 19, 2016
Transportation Committee

Testimony Submitted by Commissioner James Redeker
Department of Transportation

HB 5150 – AAC Tree Wardens' Notices on Trees and Shrubs Prior to Removal, Tree Removal Along State Highways and Clean-up by Public Utility Corporations Following Certain Tree Removal.

The Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) is responsible for the maintenance of all state-owned roads and highways in Connecticut and it is the Department's primary mission to keep the infrastructure safe for motorists as well as efficient for the movement of people, goods and commerce. To this end, it is the Department's responsibility to prune, trim or remove dead, dying, decaying or otherwise compromised trees and vegetation in the state-owned right-of-way, such as the shoulder area and center-median of highways, roadways and ramps. The CTDOT employs tree wardens in each of their four districts who report to a State Licensed Arborist. These employees are experts in identifying potentially hazardous trees and establishing tree management priorities along state roadways.

The maintenance of shade trees and other vegetation on state roads and highways falls within Connecticut General Statute 13a-140. The statute grants the Commissioner of Transportation the authority to cut, remove or prune any tree, shrub or other vegetation located within the highway right-of- way, whenever necessary, for the safe, convenient travel by the public.

Safety is the CTDOT's highest priority. For the three year period from 2012 to 2014, there were over 7,800 motor vehicle incidents involving tree strikes. These accidents resulted in 147 fatalities state wide. While most of the incidents involved motor vehicles leaving the highway, over 560 were due to trees falling onto the travel portion of the highways. Currently, there are 39 pending claims against the State of Connecticut.

As part of the CTDOT's vegetation management program, reestablishment of a clear zone along high speed roadways in a priority. Trees and brush were not present when the highways were constructed, however due to years of deferred maintenance they have become hazardous to the motoring public. The "clear zone" is an unobstructed area beyond the edge of pavement that provides an unencumbered, impact-free buffer for errant vehicles that unintentionally leave the roadway. The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) "Guidelines for

Vegetation Management" published in 2011 consider a tree with a trunk greater than 4" in diameter as a hazardous fixed object. The AASHTO specification for a clear zone on major highways with

design speeds of 60 mph for a flat, level terrain on a straight section of highway is 30 to 32 feet. CTDOT follows these established guidelines.

Tree and vegetation pruning and removal is typically a routine day-to-day activity for the CTDOT however, following Tropical Storm Irene, and the October Snow Storm in 2011, a Two Storm Panel was established to assess the state's response and how the state can better prepare for future disasters. (The after math of these storms left over 500 state roads impassable and over 750,000 homes and businesses without power). The panel recommended that a State Vegetation Management Task Force be established creating guidelines regarding roadside vegetation. CTDOT played a very important role in that Task Force and is an active member.

The Two Storm Panel report also recommended increasing the tree maintenance budget for trimming and removing dead, dying and structurally impaired trees at an accelerated rate. Trees being removed are referred by District Supervisors, who travel the respective roadways weekly, to the Department's arborists who identify the trees as a potential hazard to the traveling public. Removals also include trees and brush that obscure sight-lines or have the potential to fall onto the state roadways.

Removal of overhead trees and vegetation also increases sunlight onto road surfaces, which in turn, raises pavement temperatures. During winter storms this increase in road surface temperatures has been proven to accelerate improved road conditions, reduce labor and equipment costs, as well as the amount of winter deicing materials.

The utility companies also trim and remove a large number of trees throughout the state in and around power lines within the CTDOT Right of Way under a permit process.

Many other incidental positive impacts of tree management have been realized. The tree management along our highways has reestablished the habitat for meadow birds and other species. The Federal Highway Administration recently adopted legislation to turn the highway medians into pollinator corridors for bees and other pollinating insects. With proper planting and regrowth of flowering grasses, the pollinators will be reestablished. Another positive result is the exposure of vehicles to wildlife. Over the past five years, the number of deer strikes have been reduced along these corridors.

The proposed legislation will add significant resource burdens for the Department of Transportation to provide the plans as well as review projects being submitted by municipalities and private individuals. Without increased staffing, this would cause unnecessary and substantial delays in addressing critical needs. In addition, permits being issued by the Department for municipal and private projects requiring the new plans would add considerable time, delaying the projects as well as adding additional costs to those projects.

The Department needs to retain the right to determine and remove hazards in a timely manner. Delays in quickly addressing trees could result in serious injury or death to motorists, and could expose the state to unnecessary and expensive claims.

The CTDOT is completely committed to the safety of the motoring public and the efficiency of the state's transportation network. At the same time, the Department understands the aesthetic and environmental value of healthy vegetation and trees. As such, the Department will continue to make reasonable efforts to preserve trees and aesthetic appeal if safety and/or efficiency will not be compromised by doing so.

Connecticut Department of Transportation Memberships:
Tree Warden Association of Connecticut
Connecticut Urban Forest Council
Connecticut Tree Protective Association
State Vegetation Management Task Force
Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee

For further information or questions, please contact Pam Sucato (pamela.sucato@ct.gov) or CJ Strand (carl.strand@ct.gov) at the Department of Transportation, (860) 594-3013.

BEFORE

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