

Testimony S.J. 5 – Resolution proposing an Amendment to the State Constitution Concerning the Environment and Natural Resources of the State

Honorable Chairs and Members of the Environment Committee - thank you for holding this public hearing on S.J.5, a Resolution designed to better protect Connecticut's public lands.

For more than 100 years, Connecticut has followed the vision of Connecticut's park and forest founders and has done an outstanding job of acquiring some of the most amazing landscapes within our borders. Our state recreation areas are visited by more than 8 million guests every year contributing billions of dollars to the state's economy, expanding our growing tourism industry and supporting the health and welfare and quality of life for all Connecticut's citizens. Sadly, there have been many attempts over the years to convey state recreation and natural resource properties for the benefit of towns, private developers or businesses. Through the efforts of conservation organizations, Friends groups, and ordinary citizens, these potential takings have been thwarted. With ever-tightening budgets and increased land values, the pressure on these lands will only increase.

Conveyance of state conservation, recreation and agricultural land is an important issue for the General Assembly to address. The Friends of CT State Parks feel that this Constitutional Amendment is timely and necessary to create a rigorous and transparent public process with regard to conveyance.

While the Friends of CT State Parks appreciate the effort put forth to create S.J.5, we would like to offer some additional language that would serve to better protect our state's precious natural resources and our conservation, recreation and agricultural property.

The FCSP recommends that S.J. 5 be protective of lands that have agricultural, conservation, or recreational values not just "conservation value" as proposed.

State Park Friends organizations believe that public recreation, conservation and agricultural lands should not be given away without the scrutiny of a robust public process. To do otherwise is a violation of the public trust and dismisses the vision and hard work of the original Park & Forest Commission. It also discourages donation of outstanding properties out of fear that the land may be given away.

*FCSP recommends that S.J. 5 include a requirement for a **local** public hearing as opposed to the more general currently proposed verbiage "public hearing."*

The Friends believe that land should not be given away without compensation that is equal to or exceeds the values being lost in the region where they are being conveyed. All of Connecticut's taxpayers paid for the acquisition, development and maintenance.

FCSP recommends that the state Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection or the Dept. of Agriculture (depending on the managing agency of the property) receive fair market monetary compensation as well as conservation value. Any funds received by the state shall be dedicated to acquisition of property to replace lost land.

The Friends believe that conveying state conservation and recreation land should be a rigorous process, not just a simple bill buried in the morass of legislation.

The Friends fully support the 2/3 majority vote of the membership of the General Assembly to approve a conveyance of public lands;

The Friends also recommend each property conveyance to be considered in separate bills so that undesirable proposals are not tied to those that are of significant benefit to the public or sensitive resources.

The Friends of CT State Parks, as well as numerous other environmental and land conservation organizations, spend valuable resources and innumerable hours of time each year battling potential losses of parks, forests and farmland. Having worked diligently to support the state's acquisition of significant properties, the Friends of CT State Parks are frustrated by the constant assault on the lands we hold dear and work tirelessly to preserve.

In closing, the Friends of CT State Parks thank you again for your support of this concept, and hope you move forward to help ensure that conveyances of public lands are always the exception and not the rule.

Thank you.

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