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Testimony

In Support of HB 5619

AN ACT CONVEYING CERTAIN PARCELS OF STATE LAND AND REQUIRING A STUDY OF CERTAIN STATE REAL PROPERTY

Government Administration and Elections Committee

March 14, 2016

Good Morning Senator Cassano, Representative Jutila and esteemed members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee. I am here today to speak in favor of HB 5619, ***AN ACT CONVEYING CERTAIN PARCELS OF STATE LAND AND REQUIRING A STUDY OF CERTAIN STATE REAL PROPERTY***. I am here to advocate for Section 8 of the bill which involves the transfer of raw land associated with the former Mystic Oral School to the town of Groton for purposes of economic development, recreational, and the establishment of additional open space.

To give everyone some history of the property, the education center, formerly called the Mystic Oral School, served as a residential school for the deaf from 1895 until 1980. From 1990 to 2011 there had been a wide range of intermittent uses by various organizations, including a day care center and firefighter training. The town of Groton had established a recreation department's aquatics program. Special Olympics also used the pool. Additionally high school soccer and lacrosse teams practiced on a field there. A gymnastics program and a ballroom dancing program also used portions of the facility.

In 2011 the State decided to close down the property in an apparent attempt to cut costs and evicted all tenants using the property including the Town of Groton, a defense contractor, and all the entities using the facility for athletic activities. Five years later the property sits vacant with the heat and air conditioning still operating and the buildings rapidly decaying because of neglect. Groton is facing its very own Norwich Hospital problem and passage of this legislation will help us to avoid that.

Due to its location near I95 and downtown Mystic the property has significant economic development potential for both the State and the Town of Groton. The Department of Administrative Services has been attempting to sell the property that is in its possession and the Town has been assisting where it can. Where we struggle in crafting any reuse plans is the fact that at some point in the last 10 to 15 years the property was subdivided internally between state agencies. At a point that no one has yet been able to tell me when or how it happened, all of the land not immediately associated with the buildings was split off and put in the hands of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. This subdivision has put handcuffs on the property, is making it extraordinarily difficult to sell, and was transacted without the knowledge, input, or blessing of the Town.

The Groton Town Manager will tell you that they recently had a very interested and motivated buyer who wanted to re-use the buildings and open a for profit school. This would have placed the property back on the tax rolls, created employment opportunities, and revitalized the entire facility. What killed the deal is that the developer needed to build dormitories and there was not available land to do so because of the subdivision. It is my strong belief that this subdivision will be a continuous problem handcuffing the property if we cannot rectify it with the passage of this legislation.

The value of this land is significant on a number of levels and its subdivision was most likely done to preserve beautiful forest land that descends over 60 sloping acres to the banks of the Mystic River. It needs to be on the record that neither I nor the town of Groton wants to see this land deforested and turned into anything that wouldn't fit into the overall plan of economic development and preservation for this section of town. As a point of reference it is important to note that River Road in Mystic passes through the property and is designated as a Scenic Road which brings to the table an additional layer of protections against development. It is the intention of this transaction to allow for the ability of the Town of Groton to be in a better position to assist in the sale of the Oral School buildings, allow for a minor expansion of the footprint of the developed sections of the property, and then to preserve the remainder of the land for recreation and open space.

As I stated earlier it is of significant concern that Groton could be facing its own version of a Norwich Hospital problem. Right now we are fortunate that the State has not turned off the heat and air conditioning which is helping to slow the deterioration of the buildings but as we all know that could change this year as the state looks for every penny to save. Putting the subdivided parcels associated with DEEP in the hands of the Town of Groton will be a major step in making the property more marketable and will still allow for preservation of forested lands along the Mystic River.

With that I will close and ask that you all vote favorably for this bill and for the inclusion of Groton's request. As a point of reference I have included some photos of the buildings on the property. Thank you for your time today.