

Written testimony submitted by Ralph Scarpino to the Environment Committee

February 18, 2016

Re: S.J. 5 Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the State Constitution Concerning the protection of state owned open space lands from being sold, traded or given away.

My name is Ralph Scarpino and reside in the town of Barkhamsted. I would like to go on record in supporting a State Constitutional Amendment that protects the State's open space land that support agriculture, forests, wildlife management areas, recreational opportunities and all other associated amenities from being removed from the public trust unless it is in the best interest of the citizens of Connecticut.

I have recently retired from the State DEEP/DEP Division of Forestry where I spent almost 40 years working within the State Forest system, working with private woodland owners, supporting the state forest products industry and providing protection from the devastation of forest insects, disease and wildfire. In addition, I am the President of the newly form Friends of American Legion and Peoples State Forests.

Over the decades that I have been involved with land stewardship and protection there has been numerous attempts to trade, sell or give away public lands for the benefit of an individual. Many of these attempts have not come to fruition due to the outcry from various Conservation minded organizations and the public. Many of these backroom deals are just that and are proposed to support an individual's greed with total disregard for the public trust. Most citizens of Connecticut believe that publically owned land entrusted to the state is there in perpetuity for all citizens to benefit from. A few, informed individuals know better and I have had conversations with large landowners who have told me in no uncertain terms they would never "trust" the state with their lands because of the lack of permanent protection. What a sad commentary on our government.

The proposed Amendment should have some items strengthened.

- The phrase 'conservation value' needs to be more specific to include agricultural, conservation, forest, park and recreational properties.

- There needs to be an assurance that there is a local public hearing, not just a public hearing. I have witnessed public hearings being held in Rocky Hill on issues that were proposed for the West Branch of the Farmington River in Barkhamsted. That is not right.

- There needs to be a 2/3 majority vote to approve giving away, selling, trading or changing use of such public lands.

- Each proposed conveyance of such lands need to have a separate bill.

- The value of the parcels need to be compensated not just a proposed 'sale' price.

-There needs to be a recognition that reasonable exceptions for small parcels may be wise. These types of exceptions could include minor boundary adjustments and/or allowance of public access.

This proposed amendment would help to safeguard our public lands and allow them to benefit all citizens of our state. It would encourage donors of land to step up and feel confident that their land will be held in perpetuity as their wishes would dictate. It would safeguard the landscape from fragmentation and save valuable time of professional resources that must research properties and then work to dismiss the proposals.

I encourage members of the Environment Committee and all elected officials to support and strengthen the provisions of S.J.5

*Ralph Scargun*

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