TESTIMONY FOR COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION & ELECTIONS

FROM RIVERS ALLIANCE OF CONNECTICUT

PUBLIC HEARING, March 20, 2017

RE: House Bill 7278 AAC The Conveyance of Certain Parcels of Land

And Members of the Committee

Rivers Alliance of Connecticut is a statewide, non-profit coalition of river organizations, individuals, and businesses formed to protect Connecticut’s waters by promoting sound water policies, uniting and strengthening the state’s many watershed groups, and providing education on water stewardship.

We urge you to delete Sections 3, 9, and 10. We have a few comments about the other conveyances.

By way of preamble, the conveyance act generally transfers land (or an interest in land) owned by the entire public to a segment of the public or into private hands. The majority of the public is at risk of losing something valuable in such conveyances. Therefore, we have supported an amendment to the state constitution that will guarantee that the General Assembly and its constituents have had the opportunity to be sure that a conveyance made by the legislature is a benefit to the entire public.

Section 3, at least in part, has been brought to this Committee in the past. As before, it is opposed by local and state environmental advocates. It conveys highly valuable wildlife habitat to a nonprofit organization for a cemetery and to the Town of Farmington for unspecified municipal purposes. Connecticut is losing wildlife and habitat steadily; species are disappearing. Almost every parcel of conservation open space is acquired with great effort and investment of time and money. The donor, even in an outright sale, is usually motivated by a desire to see the land conserved and is usually told (in a nonbinding manner) that the land will indeed be conserved. In this case, the White Memorial provided a grant for the acquisition. This conveyance should be entirely and promptly rejected.

Section 9 conveys 11.65 acres from the Babcock Wildlife Management Area in Colchester to neighboring property owners for access to their property, with the state to receive $10,000. Evidently, there is an access road now, reportedly across wetlands. So, it appears that the owners are not without use of their property. Many, many properties in the state have difficult access due to wetlands. It is not clear why the state should give up public wildlife habitat to solve this particular problem. Moreover, if the new, better road (on state land) would enable development of the property with a first cut or subdivision, that might well be detrimental to the ecological function of the Wildlife Management Area. (It would also mean that the access might be worth much more than $10,000.) Rivers Alliance opposes this conveyance as unnecessarily compromising valuable conservation lands. It is also does not come with adequate research to support the contention that it should be considered.

Section 10 conveys 10 acres in the custody of DEEP to the town of Groton for economic development. The property contains the former, historic Mystic Oral School. Last year’s conveyance act had a section on this property with a 60-acre conveyance. That included coastal land. Evidently, there is or, until recently, was considerable contamination on the site. It is not clear why this conveyance is before the legislature rather than the agency. There is no detail on what kind of development is contemplated,
who will do cleanup if it is required, or who will benefit. This conveyance of a complex property represents the kind of transfer that should receive the sort of detailed review that would be provided under the proposed Constitutional Amendment.

**General Comment.** Most of the other sections relate to Department of Transportation (DOT) property. Why are these conveyances not being done by DOT itself? Does DOT approve all of them? The conveyance act may be more convenient for all concerned, but it blocks transparency. And, every now and then, a bad deal slips through.

Thank you for your attention.

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