February 1, 2019

To: Environment Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
From: The Connecticut Audubon Society
Re: H.B. 5254, S.B. 237, H.B. 5314 and H.B. 5318

The Connecticut Audubon Society strongly supports H.B. 5254, “An Act Establishing a Pilot Program Authorizing Municipalities to Impose a Buyer's Conveyance Fee on Real Property to Fund the Purchase and Stewardship of Open Space.”

We have consistently supported efforts by the General Assembly to increase the pace of land conservation in Connecticut, and we note that the state is still significantly behind in its goal to have 21% of the state’s land protected by 2021. Land preservation on a significant scale requires consistent funding and passage of this act will enable municipalities that opt into this program to establish a dedicated funding source for land acquisition and stewardship.

It’s important to emphasize that this is a home-rule bill and is simply enabling legislation to allow towns to participate if they so choose. If passed, it will allow local governments to make the decision that is best for them. We are confident that for the towns in the pilot program the transfer fee authorized by H.B. 5254 would quickly become a consistent source of funding to buy, preserve and manage land. Additional municipalities would likely see this success and would want to take advantage of this program as well in the future.

Similar programs have been immensely effective in New York, Massachusetts and other states. We firmly believe H.B. 5254 will succeed on its own and will open the door to greater land conservation and management efforts statewide.

A critical aspect of this bill is the provision that would allow funding to be utilized for activities beyond acquisition alone. It is a common misconception that once land is protected the job is done. Preserved land requires stewardship, including habitat management and restoration, successional management and invasive species monitoring and remediation. Certain parcels may also require specific stewardship actions targeting individual species or groups of species, e.g. predator exclosure cages for Piping Plover nests or psychological string-fencing for other beach nesting birds. The funds provided through this program would allow the participating municipalities to enact such needed efforts on existing open space, activities which are normally difficult to fund through existing funding sources.

We would also like to take this opportunity to support S.B. 237 “An Act Designating Rocky Top and York Hill as Protected Traprock Ridges.” Traprock ridges represent an important habitat type in Connecticut and including this area within the state’s ridgeline protection act would help to conserve the functioning ecosystems of this region, contributing to an important network of traprock ridges in the region including Sleeping Giant State Park, West Rock Ridge and East Rock Park.

Additionally we would like to express our strong support for H.B. 5314 “An Act Prohibiting the Release of Helium Balloons into the Atmosphere.” The release of helium balloons is littering plain and simple. In the course of our activities through the Audubon Alliance for Coastal Waterbirds our staff frequently encounters the remains of balloons along our coastal beaches and marshes. Often these balloons are bound with string or ribbons that can serve an entanglement hazard for many species of birds and marine organisms, including Osprey and sea turtles, the latter of which can also mistake balloons for edible prey, serving as a chocking hazard.

Finally we would also like to support H.B. 5318 “An Act Establishing Local Representation on the Connecticut Siting Council For Certain Projects.” Local knowledge of ecological
features can be essential in evaluating the potential impacts of transmission and infrastructure projects and local representation on the council would allow for a more thorough review of the potential environmental impacts of projects being evaluated by the Siting Council.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to provide input to these important proposals today.

Patrick M. Comins
Executive Director

Founded in 1898, the Connecticut Audubon Society is an independent organization that conserves Connecticut’s environment through science-based education and advocacy focused on the state’s bird populations and habitats. We own and manage 20 preserves covering almost 3,300 acres in all areas of the state, and we work with landowners to help them manage their land for the benefit of birds and other wildlife.