Bill No.: HB-6429
AN ACT CONCERNING A GRANT-IN-AID PROGRAM FOR MUNICIPALITIES
COMBATING GYPSY MOTH AND EMERALD ASH BORER INFESTATIONS.
Vote Date: 3/25/2019
Vote Action: Joint Favorable
PH Date: 3/18/2019
File No.: 612

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SPONSORS OF BILL:
Rep. Tim Ackert, 8th Dist.
Rep Doug Dubitsky, 47th Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

Invasive insects are a constant threat to trees and forests of the state. Since 2012, the emerald ash borer has been threatening white ash trees in Connecticut. This beetle is not native to North America; their larvae feed on the phloem and cambium layers of such trees. These layers are responsible for the transport of nutrients and growth of a tree. Once infested, trees will die within 2-3 years. Connecticut trees do not have the ability to effectively resist the harm caused by these exotic beetles. Although white ash has been declining in the state for several decades, due mostly to a disease called ash yellow, the concern is that the population of ash in the state will be reduced to a point that it may not be able to recover.

While the infestation of the emerald ash borer is relatively new, the gypsy moth was introduced in the state since 1905. Outbreaks of gypsy moths, mostly in areas of south-central and eastern Connecticut, have caused concern as they consume foliage in large quantities. The lack of foliage on trees results in dry forest floor conditions and increases the risk of woodland fires.

The cost of tree removal due to these invasive insects is a great burden for municipalities. The bill seeks to assist municipalities with tree removal costs by requiring that the Office of Policy and Management establish a grant-in-aid program for certain municipalities infested with emerald ash borers and gypsy moths.
RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Katie S. Dykes, Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP): Although supportive of the bill, DEEP is concerned federal or other funding sources do not exist. However, the Governor’s Capital Budget, Section 47 of Senate Bill 876, does address such concerns by allowing municipalities to use Local Capital Improvement Fund grants for the removal of dead trees.

Melissa McCaw, Secretary, State of Connecticut Office of Policy and Management (OPM): Opposes the bill. While supportive of the concept, OPM does not have the resources to administer or fund a new grant-in-aid program. An effective strategy to address the problem without incurring additional costs is to add hazardous tree mitigation efforts as an eligible project under the Local Capital Improvement Program. This solution is included in the Governor’s Bill, Senate Bill 876.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Rep. Tim Ackert 8th Assembly Dist.: Tree removal due to damages caused by invasive insects are increasing. Municipalities will need financial support from the state to address public safety concerns.

James Berardino, Director of Legislative & Marketing, Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST): Due to the number of trees that must be removed as a result of insect infestation and recent severe weather, costs for tree removal has doubled in some areas of the state and is financially challenging for many communities. COST identified two legislation pending before other committees that would authorize the use of Local Capital Improvement Program funds for certain hazardous tree removal, House Bill 5886 and the Governor’s Bond Package, and requests the committee’s consideration of the following: (1) towns need assistance in properly identifying dead and damaged trees needing of removal, (2) a public awareness campaign is needed to educate residents, (3) there are difficulties finding qualified tree removal contractors, and (4) towns need assistance in purchasing equipment.

Christopher Lippke, First Selectman, Town of Canterbury: Tree removal can cost between $500 - $1,000 per tree. In Canterbury, there are over 600 trees that must be removed. While some towns rely on Town Aid Road funding to assist in tree removal, there are towns that have used these funds for needed road projects. In addition to assisting towns in funding for tree removal, the following issues also need consideration: (1) towns need assistance in properly identifying dead and damaged trees needing of removal, (2) a public awareness campaign is needed to educate residents, (3) there are difficulties finding qualified tree removal contractors, and (4) towns need assistance in purchasing equipment.

The Environment Committee received approximately 10 written testimonies in support of the bill explaining that the cost of tree removal for municipalities has increased greatly due to the number of trees that must be removed as a result of invasive insect infestations. Additionally,
many testimonies highlighted House Bill 5886 and Senate Bill 876 which would include hazardous tree removal as an eligible project category under the Local Capital Improvement Program.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None Submitted.

Reported by: Pamela Bianca / Ussawin R. Bumpen Date: 04/15/2019