



PERMANENT PROTECTION OF STATE CONSERVATION LANDS

WHY ARE STATE CONSERVATION LANDS AT RISK?

Although Connecticut has over 255,000 acres of state parks, forests and open space classified as state conservation land, there are big loopholes that put these conservation lands at risk of being developed or used for unintended or inappropriate purposes.

Currently, the state's Conveyance Act allows the state legislature to convey or swap, sell or give away parcels of conservation land. In most instances, there is no legal protection to ensure the purposes for which the land was acquired are honored. There is typically nothing recorded in the deeds or town land records that either requires permanent protection, or clearly references the intended use or purpose of the land.

These legislative decisions for land swaps, made possible through the Conveyance Act, are often done behind closed doors with little public notice or comment. Past controversial land swaps, such as the proposed 2011 Haddam land swap, have spotlighted the flaws in the current process and created public distrust of the state's commitment to keep our conservation lands protected forever.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT FOR CONNECTICUT?

State conservation lands have many proven economic benefits. For instance, a 2013 UConn study showed that Connecticut's State Parks net over \$1.2 billion in annual revenue for our economy. Besides the revenue produced through recreational activities and jobs, state conservation land was also found to increase local property values since people are willing to pay more to live near conservation land. Additionally, thousands of volunteers invest their own time and money to help maintain these lands.

Preservation of our state conservation lands is critical to a healthy and vital ecosystem in Connecticut. Our natural resources — our water, air, forests, and wildlife — are at risk without changes to close the loopholes to ensure real protection of these lands in perpetuity. A transparent process will help ensure public lands are protected for their agricultural, conservation, and recreational purposes instead of swapped for development.

The CT Conveyance Act lacks the legal protection to ensure the purposes for which the land was acquired are honored.

A transparent process will help ensure public lands are protected.



PERMANENT PROTECTION OF STATE CONSERVATION LANDS *continued*

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Pass a constitutional amendment

Connecticut should pass a constitutional amendment that mandates a new, transparent process for considering conveyances of public conservation, recreation and agricultural lands. A change to our State Constitution is the only way to ensure a conveyance process receives public input on every proposal and every parcel.

Use existing authority

While a constitutional protection is the best solution, the process for amending Connecticut's Constitution takes several years. Last year, the legislature gave specific authority to both Department of Agriculture (DoAG) and the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) to place conservation restrictions on public recreation and agricultural lands with high conservation value. Both agencies should actively use this authority to protect lands through conservation easements and deed restrictions as enabled in PA 14-169.

Require a public hearing

Legislation or a change to the Joint Rules is needed to require the final version of the land conveyance bill and any sale, transfer or conversion of state-owned lands held for agricultural, conservation or recreational purposes to have a proper public hearing before the Environment Committee. Though the Environment Committee has jurisdiction over most matters that affect the DoAG or the DEEP, the Committee currently has no right to hold a public hearing on the conveyance of lands under the custody and control of these departments — this has to change.

Connecticut is fortunate to have beautiful open spaces with natural resources that allow us to live, play and work. It is only right to involve the public when the state legislature looks to convey or swap, sell or give away, publicly-owned conservation lands.

In 2015, the General Assembly is considering legislation that will require notice, an appraisal and the opportunity for a public hearing in the town where the parcel is located prior to the exchange of state land controlled by DEEP or DoAG.

For more information
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