

The overriding factor in the 2008 General Assembly session was the decision late in the session by the Democratic leadership and Governor Rell not to make any revisions to the second year of the current biennial budget. Several initiatives that the CLCC worked on depended upon changes being made to the next year's budget.

Since Connecticut adopted a two-year budget in 1993, it has been biennial in name only, since extensive changes have always been made before the end of the first year to the next year's spending and tax packages. This year, Governor Rell announced her proposed changes to the FY09 budget (for the fiscal year that starts July 1st) in February. In late March, the Appropriations and Finance Committees released their proposed changes. Just a few weeks later, however, reports on income tax and other revenue projections made clear that a previously projected modest state surplus for the year would instead be a modest deficit, inducing the "no action" decision by Rell and the Democrats.

It is still unclear at the end of the legislative session whether the legislature and Governor will attempt to negotiate a revised bond package for the next year.

The Face of Connecticut Campaign

The Face of Connecticut Campaign is an alliance of 60 organizations calling for an increase in the state's annual investments in acquisition and stewardship of natural lands, farmland, and historic properties and restoration of urban lands from recent levels of approximately \$55 million per year to \$100 million. Neither Governor Rell nor the Finance Committee recommended significant changes in the overall bond package for FY09, including for the programs advanced by the campaign.

The legislature did pass Bill 5873 with over 60 co-sponsors, and which if signed by the Governor, will establish a Face of Connecticut Steering Committee, of relevant state agencies and organizations to better coordinate the state's investments in these critical priorities. If a new bond package is negotiated, legislative leaders have indicated a strong desire to include at least a minimal amount of new funding to get the Face of Connecticut program established. The campaign's website is at: www.faceofconnecticut.com.

Representatives Brian Hurlbert and Livvy Floren and Senators Andrew Roraback, Andrew Maynard and Don Williams deserve special mention for their efforts on this legislation. The bill was a top priority for CLCC and many of its member organizations.

Property Tax Exemptions for Land Trusts

An important provision was amended into Bill 5873 to address a recent Superior Court decision that sided with the City of Bridgeport in denying a property tax exemption to the Aspetuck Land Trust, because it failed to promote public access to an island it owns. The island is comprised completely of salt marsh, is almost completely submerged at high tide, and is preserved for its value to shore birds. The conservation community is very concerned that aggressive tax assessors could use the decision to require land trusts to not only open their lands to the public as the vast majority already do, but to also demonstrate for each property each year what they have done to actively promote public access.

The amendment to Bill 5873, if signed into law, will make it clear that other benefits of open space land, such as preserving wildlife habitat or scenic views, will render land trust land eligible for a property tax exemption. Senator Roraback and Representative Roberta Willis

were the legislative leaders on this initiative. The Nature Conservancy, Aspetuck and Weantinogue Land Trusts and other CLCC members lobbied vigorously on this issue.

DEP Funding

Many environmental organizations worked to support the recommendations of the Appropriations Committee, particularly Representatives Denise Merrill and Terry backer and Senators Toni Harp and Bob Duff, to direct \$3 million in additional funds to the Department of Environmental Protection, to restore 50 of the staff positions that have been lost at the agency over the past two decades. This effort, however, was another that was lost due to the budget problems.

ATV's

Bill 5602, passed by the Environment, Appropriations, and Transportation Committees, would have required the DEP to open at least 20 miles of state land to ATV's, imposed a 1% fee on ATV purchases to fund trail maintenance and design, and required all ATV's to be registered. Although many CLCC members have long wanted the "universal registration" of all ATV's called for in the bill, many were still lukewarm at best to the bill since that provision was very vague and did not include any penalties for non-compliance. Many conservationists also feel that DEP already has a sound policy in place for soliciting proposals to open certain state lands to ATV use, and are opposed to the bill's absolute requirement to open lands.

The bill was killed in the Finance Committee. The Connecticut Forest and Parks Association and many other members of CLCC closely monitored this legislation.

Conservation Tax Credit

Bill 5137, introduced by the Working Lands Alliance, The Trust for Public Land, and The Nature Conservancy, would have created a credit for individual taxpayers against their state income tax for donations or bargain sales of land or easements. The LCCC, the CLCC's predecessor, lobbied successfully for such a credit for corporations in 1998, but the legislature has been very reluctant to open the door to individual credits. This year's proposal was unsuccessful.

Invasive Plants

Last year, the legislature appropriated \$500,000 for DEP to establish an Invasive Plants program to provide public education, rapid response, inter-agency coordination, and a grant program for municipalities and land trusts. Bill 5147 would have granted the Department of Agriculture and the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station authority to inspect retail outlets for the sale of banned plants, and make other changes to the invasive plants statutes. The bill died in the Judiciary Committee, and attempts to amend it to other bills was unsuccessful.