

Connecticut Land Conservation Council

2007 Legislative Session Wrap Up

As of June 27, 2007

The 2007 Regular Session of the Connecticut General Assembly ended June 6th at midnight and – to paraphrase the poet T.S. Eliot – it ended not with a bang, but with a whimper. The lack of a budget agreement between legislative leaders and the Governor meant a Special Session would be needed to finish out the year's work. That Special Session, expected to conclude June 28th with a House vote, has so far approved an appropriations budget and some of the necessary implementing legislation. The bond package is not expected for a few weeks and will determine funding for DEP open space programs. Below is a quick recap of CLCC's legislative priorities. We'll provide additional analysis after the bond package is finalized.

1. **ATVs:** An Act Concerning All Terrain Vehicles (H.B. 7277) – DIED. One of three (3) bills raised on ATVs this session (7 were proposed), this bill requiring universal registration of all-terrain vehicles and establishing fines for trail and habitat damage was approved by the Environment Committee only to die in the Transportation Committee, where the other two bills had also died. A late-breaking amendment that would have required DEP to open hundreds of miles of trails to ATV use was blocked in the last days of the session. The issue remains to be addressed next session.
2. **Face of CT:** An Act Concerning the Face of Connecticut (H.B. 7275) – PASSED. The bill in its current form increases the percentage of funding available from state open space grant programs to 65% for towns, nonprofits, and water utilities, and to 75% for targeted and distressed communities. It also establishes a municipal loan program for the purchase farmland.

FOC Funding:

Appropriations – The appropriations budget includes \$1.4M in additional funding for statewide GIS mapping, along with funding for a staff person at OPM for the Office of Responsible Growth that may help to administer the GIS program. The budget also restores \$1.7M funding for State Parks - a net increase of \$1.4M.

Bonding – The Finance Committee proposed \$7.5 M for the DEP's Recreations and Natural Heritage Trust Program, \$5M for the Municipal Open Space and Watershed Matching Grants Program, and \$5M for Department of Ag's Purchase of Development Rights program in their budget - - less than Governor Rell who had proposed \$10M for each program. The Committee also proposed a number of

“earmarks” funding specific projects in specific communities. The latest information we have is that a bond package is not expected until at least the second week of July. The compromise shaping up will not include earmarks, but will fold the funds earmarked in the Committee budget into relevant programs. For example, funds for the earmarked open space projects would be folded into DEP’s Open Space and Municipal Grants or Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program.

3. **Endangered Lands:** An Act Concerning Provisions to the Department of Public Health Statutes and Revising the Scope of Podiatric Medicine (H.B. 7163) – PASSED. This bill contains an important technical correction will allow continued success of the 2004 incentives for water companies to sell their land for conservation. The legislative correction clarifies that water company land should not be placed on the auction block to the highest bidder, which would virtually assure that developers and not conservationists would buy any surplus water company land.
4. **Municipal Green Fund:** An Act Concerning Global Warming (S.B. 1432) – DIED. The bill included a provision establishing a Municipal Green Fund (conveyance tax on buyers) to fund land conservation and other related activities, among a host of other proposals. The Green Fund and a ban on the sale of incandescent light bulbs were stripped out of the bill, before the remaining legislation died in the Judiciary Committee.
5. **Environmental Review of State Land Transfers:** An Act Concerning Administrative Procedures of the Department of Public Works (S.B. 1182) – PASSED. This bill includes provisions that require public notice and environmental reviews of state land transfers (originally H.B. 5249). Spurred by the Norwich Hospital sale two years ago, this bill culminates two years of effort. Last year’s bill died on the Senate calendar and efforts to weaken its provisions continued up to a last-minute vote on the bill this session.
6. **Invasive Plants:** The budget just APPROVED by the Legislature includes \$500,000 as proposed by An Act Concerning an Appropriation for the Control of Invasive Plants (S.B. 282). This funding will go to establish a statewide invasive plants program at DEP.
7. **Property Taxes:** An Act Concerning Tax Abatements for Property Conveyed to a Nonprofit Land Conservation Organization (S.B. 1249) – PASSED. Under current tax law, land trusts either purchasing or receiving a donation of land can be held liable for local property taxes owed on that property for the remaining portion of the current tax year (since local property taxes are paid in arrears). The Nature Conservancy worked with the Greenwich Land Trust to support this legislation that will shield land trusts from this liability by allowing municipalities to voluntarily abate these taxes.