

Yanking State Conservation Money Now Is Foolhardy

By **CHET ARNOLD, JOHN VOLIN**

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Connecticut was once a pioneer in land conservation. No more. Indeed, regional New England conservation initiatives such as the Wildlands and Woodlands effort pay very little attention to Connecticut, presumably because we have been written off as a lost cause.

And the situation may be getting worse. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's proposed budget includes a complete sweep — more than \$40 million — of the next two years of funding raised by the Community Investment Act, the principal funding source of Connecticut's two major land preservation programs, the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Fund and the Farmland Preservation Program. An additional \$15 million would be taken from existing conservation coffers.

Ironically, the proposal comes just when Connecticut should be ramping up its conservation programs, not undermining them. It arrives during the waning days of a recession-generated respite from the incremental erosion of our forests, wetlands, farmlands and other natural resources, caused primarily by poorly planned residential development.

Now, despite the current budget crisis, there are signs that the state economy is recovering. With economic recovery comes development, which most residents welcome with open arms. But although development need not result in the fragmentation of forests and the loss of valuable farmland, our system of land use planning and regulation is such that it often does.

This is not a stump speech for smart growth, transit-oriented development, regional government or any of the other policy changes that are ultimately needed to solve this problem. It is a pragmatic plea for a concerted effort by state leaders to support land conservation now, before the economic recovery puts most meaningful conservation out of reach. In the short term, this means increasing state funding for open space protection — not wiping it out.

Here are a few statistics from the UConn Center for Land Use Education and Research, which uses satellite imagery to track large-scale changes in Connecticut's landscape. In the 25 years from 1985 to 2010, Connecticut lost 190 square miles of forestland, an area almost six times the size of Manhattan. That same period saw 226 square miles of "core" forest, the deep woods critical as wildlife habitat, carved into smaller, less functional fragments. Lawn grass, a monoculture that is no friend to

biodiversity, now covers about 7.7 percent of our state, an area greater than Middlesex County. This is more than the area covered by agricultural fields.

Connecticut's rich history in conserving lands for wildlife, recreation, community character and quality of life began in the 1890s. To this list can be added more recently recognized "ecosystem services" such as crop pollination, flood control, a stronger ability to respond to climate change and (as Californians can appreciate) clean and abundant water. Protection of these services cannot be relegated to future generations. The data demonstrate that we have less time than most other states to preserve enough open space to remain environmentally and economically viable. The key word here is "irrevocable." Parking lots do not revert to wildlife preserves, nor do subdivisions give way to farm fields.

Yes, it's a complicated problem. But while debates rage (or not) on state land use policy and programs, the front lines of conservation remain where they have always been — at the local ramparts. Municipal governments, local land trusts and private landowners lead the way on land conservation, and have for some time. These local leaders weave together the complex threads of legal, social, financial and emotional factors that go into parcel-by-parcel land preservation.

Funding is the last step of this painstaking process. And while finding cash is never easy, it is still the easiest part of the equation. This is why the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program and the Farmland Preservation Program, both competitively administered and funded from the Community Investment Act, are such good investments.

At this critical juncture, the state must support and empower local action. Give towns, land trusts and conservation-minded landowners the financial power to close the deal. It may well be now or never.

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