



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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Executive Director

April 27, 2022

Martin Looney, Senate President Pro Tempore
Matt Ritter, Speaker of the House
Co-chairs Flexer and Fox of the Government Administration and Elections
Committee

Re: Senate Bill 491

Honorable members,

The Council on Environmental Quality (Council) is concerned that the proposal in SB 491 to transfer a portion of Housatonic Meadows State Park to private ownership contravenes the legislature's previously established intent to protect state-owned open space lands and to enhance public access to those lands.

Legislative and public sentiment has been clearly in support of keeping public lands in public hands. This was evident in the support received in 2018 for the amendment to Article III of the State Constitution:

Sec. 20. (a) "The general assembly shall not enact any legislation requiring a state agency to sell, transfer or otherwise dispose of any real property or interest in real property that is under the custody or control of such agency to any person or entity other than another state agency unless a committee of the general assembly has held a public hearing regarding such sale, transfer or disposition of such property or interest and the act of the general assembly requiring such sale, transfer or disposition of real property or interest in real property is limited in subject matter to provisions concerning such sale, transfer or disposition.

(b) In the case of real property or an interest in real property that is under the custody or control of the Department of Agriculture or the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, or a successor agency of either department, in addition to complying with the requirements of subsection (a) of this section, any act requiring the sale, transfer or disposition of such property or interest shall pass upon roll call by a yea vote of at least two-thirds of the total membership of each house."

That amendment was one of a history of actions by the legislature to protect public lands from ready alienation. Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) [Sec. 4b-47](#) provides for advanced public notice and comment prior to the disposition of state lands or interest therein:

"a state agency, department or institution, such agency, department or institution shall provide notice of such sale or transfer to the Council on Environmental Quality, the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management and the Commissioner of Energy and Environmental Protection

on a form approved by the Council on Environmental Quality. Such notice shall be published in the Environmental Monitor and shall provide for a written public comment period of thirty days following publication of such notice, during which the public and state agencies may submit comments to the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management. Such comments may include, but shall not be limited to, significant natural and recreational resources on such land and recommend means to preserve such natural or recreational resources.”

It has been the long-standing wish of the legislature to uphold the public interest in acquiring land for public benefit and enjoyment. In 2021, the state invested more than \$1.5 million and leveraged more than \$1.3 million to acquire 733 acres through the Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program, the primary vehicle for adding land to the state’s system of parks, forests, wildlife areas, water access areas, and other open spaces. The dissonance of disposing of park land while simultaneously purchasing land to meet the state’s legislatively mandated goal to acquire ten percent of Connecticut’s land for preserved open space (CGS [Sec 23-8\(b\)](#)) is difficult to understand and the Bill offers no rationale or overriding public policy justification.

With the adoption by the legislature of the “Passport to Parks” in 2018, visitation to state parks has increased. Closures of state parks due to excess capacity increased from 120 in 2019 to 478 in 2020. More parkland, not less, is needed to respond to public demand.

For the reasons stated above, the Council on Environmental Quality urges rejection of this Bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Peter Hearn", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Peter Hearn
Executive Director