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## Closing In On Open Vistas

### State Policies Obstruct Preservation

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HARWINTON -- Frank Chiamonte is an optimistic, gregarious man who loves the daily minutiae of being first selectman in a small town, but there's one occupational hazard of the job that he has come to dread.

For 18 months, Chiamonte has watched with growing frustration as one deal after another to add farmland, now vulnerable to development, to Harwinton's 2,222-acre Roraback Wildlife Management Area has fallen through, either because landowners grew weary of delays in negotiating sales to the state or because Connecticut lacked the funds to act quickly.

Like many once-rural Connecticut towns under pressure from large development projects, Harwinton is being rapidly suburbanized, and Chiamonte suspects the community has only a few years left to identify and protect vital parcels that could help retain its rustic character. But now four deals, which would have added a total of up to 450 acres to the Roraback forest, have either collapsed or are still awaiting state approval.

For Chiamonte, dramatically expanding the Roraback forest isn't simply a cherished personal dream or an aesthetic benefit for the town. Aggressive land conservation is also a financial necessity.

"People miss the point when they think that adding 450 acres to the Roraback forest is simply a visually attractive addition to the town," Chiamonte said during a tour of the heavily forested wildlife area on South Road in Harwinton last week. "But conservation is really a financial matter, too. If these landowners sell out to developers, the average house will have two children, costing us at least \$10,000 apiece a year to school.

"With just one developer here talking about adding 50 houses, that's \$1 million a year in new school costs, and we can never tax these houses enough to pay for that. This argument that adding houses grows your grand list and thus town finances is crazy. Conservation actually saves you money while adding to the beauty of the town."

Chiamonte is just one of a growing list of selectmen and mayors in Litchfield County, northern Fairfield County and eastern Connecticut for whom limited growth and aggressive land conservation have become a mantra, but many of them have been stopped by the same financial roadblock.

After three years of spending upwards of \$30 million on farmland preservation and open space, Connecticut in 2004 sharply curtailed its annual allocations, mostly to reduce state deficits. In 2005, Connecticut spent \$7.2 million purchasing development rights to farms and buying open space. Last year the state spent \$14.8 million, according to figures prepared by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. (Numbers provided by the state DEP often do not agree with nationally compiled figures because of differences in calculating spending for open space.)

Meanwhile, several huge parcels that conservationists and town officials regard as vital to Connecticut's coastal or mountain landscapes - the 1,000-acre Preserve in Old Saybrook, or the large holdings of Northeast Utilities around Candlewood Lake in New Milford - have yet to be protected. But the costs of even one such acquisition are climbing above the \$10 million range, which could gobble up the state's entire conservation budget, depending on the year.

Connecticut's conservation shortfall is considered an embarrassment by many conservationists and environmentally minded state legislators, who point to figures compiled by the Conservation Almanac project of the Trust for Public Land, a national land conservation organization.

After 2003, when Connecticut's spending for land conservation began to plunge, states such as Pennsylvania and New York continued spending, and retiring Republican Gov. George Pataki of New York received a great deal of credit for preserving more than a million acres during his three terms. Two states associated in the public mind with suburban sprawl - New Jersey and Florida - have in fact become national leaders in conservation by earmarking special taxes and fees that annually produce more than \$200 million in each state for conservation funds.

"Do you know how much the state of New Jersey spent in 2005 on land preservation projects?" asks state Sen. Andrew Roraback, R-Goshen, one of the state's most vocal advocates of conservation and a cousin of the original donor of the Roraback forest in Harwinton. "New Jersey spent \$343 million. Do you know how much Connecticut spent in the same year? \$7.2 million. As a proud son of Connecticut I thought I'd never hear myself say this, but maybe we need to become more like New Jersey. What we have to preserve here is considered by many out-of-staters a national treasure."

Connecticut's per capita spending for conservation of \$75 is actually one of the highest in the country, but environmentalists caution that this number is deceptive. With a relatively small population of 3.5 million and some of the most expensive land in the country, the state is acquiring a lot less land for the same dollars. According to the Conservation Almanac's tabulation, for example, between 1998 and 2005 Maryland spent \$72 per capita and preserved almost 250,000 acres. For roughly the same per capita spending, Connecticut acquired 65,969 acres.

"Measuring per capita expenditures for land conservation doesn't really tell you much, except that Connecticut looks relatively strong because we have a small population and expensive land," says Roraback. "But we have the same needs to protect our views, our wildlife habitats and our pace of life as other states."

Roraback is now circulating a bill that would earmark \$100 million from the state's projected \$548 million surplus to "jump start" land conservation projects statewide. But the bill has received tepid support from the administration of Gov. M. Jodi Rell, which has identified other issues such as health care and transportation as priorities.

Connecticut's on-again, off-again spending for open lands has generated a crisis mentality within the environmental community, most of whom agree with Chiaramonte that the state has - at best - maybe five or six years to catch up before vital parcels disappear. And a collision of several factors means that every year the state delays spending money for acquisitions, costs go up.

According to figures compiled by a Connecticut farmland preservation group, the Working Lands Alliance, and the University of Connecticut's Center for Land Use Education and Research, Connecticut loses 7,000 to 9,000 acres of farmland a year, and perhaps as much as 18 acres of forest per day as coastal Connecticut, the I-395 corridor in eastern Connecticut, and the Litchfield hills endure a national trend of exurban development - that is, development beyond the suburbs that ring cities. The long delays for planning and environmental approval by the state and towns have prodded many developers toward bigger and bigger projects to recover their costs. Meanwhile, Connecticut's cost per acre for land - at almost \$4,000, among the highest in the country - means that with its declining expenditures, the state is falling further behind.

"The aging population of farmers, the rising value of land, and the changing patterns of development are creating enormous pressures on these small towns that will just build and build

over the next several years," says Jiff Martin, project director for the Working Lands Alliance. "It's not just a matter of too few programs and too little money spent on preserving lands. Connecticut suffers a serious lack of vision from the top."

Since her appointment by Rell in 2004, DEP Commissioner Gina McCarthy has been praised by Republicans and Democrats alike for her advocacy of a regional approach to sprawl and subjecting major development projects in environmentally sensitive areas to tough regulatory scrutiny. She points out that the Rell administration created an Office of Responsible Growth in October to coordinate state and local conservation efforts, help towns update zoning ordinances, and revise the state's "Green Plan" to identify sensitive ecological areas and improve land preservation. The passage of the Community Reinvestment Act in 2005, which channels money toward preservation through a \$30 recording fee on all deed filings, is now generating between \$10 million and \$12 million a year for open space and farmland preservation.

"If you run around and just snap up every open space in sight, you can never buy enough," McCarthy says. "You have to curb development by planning responsible growth initiatives too. So much of government is reactive, and states like New Jersey and Florida are getting all of this credit now precisely because they did such a poor job in the past of preserving the nature of their communities."

State Sen. Bill Finch, D-Bridgeport, co-chairman of the legislature's environment committee, last year tried unsuccessfully to pass a bill mandating that the state spend \$60 million of its surplus for land conservation. He supports Roraback's bill calling for \$100 million in spending this year but worries that a lack of visible support from the Rell administration could doom its chances.

"I give Gina very high grades for working for the environment, but she's in a tough spot," says Finch. "Her boss, the governor, is very conservative on this issue and won't let her spend. It's all about money and whether it's fixing schools or cleaning up Long Island Sound, government expresses its desires by what it devotes resources to. New Jersey has been able to take a very comprehensive approach by devoting a small surcharge on its sales tax that raises over \$200 million a year, and Connecticut has to do the same sort of thing."

Matt Zieper, research director for the national Trust for Public Lands, says that the key to a successful state conservation program is a stable, sizable revenue stream that doesn't fluctuate every year according to the whims of state politics, so that towns applying for conservation funds are confident that the state will eventually come through.

"New Jersey and Florida became national conservation leaders by creating reliable mechanisms for funding that are there year after year," Zieper says. "Connecticut's Community Reinvestment Act is a step in the right direction, but the need is much greater than the \$12 million it is creating every year."

Back in Harwinton, First Selectman Chiaramonte stops his car at the edge of another forested parcel that he'd like to see added to the Roraback Wildlife Management area. Stately stone walls recede toward the adjacent state land and an orange sunset glows over the Roraback oaks and pines on the hillside. Chiaramonte's dreams of leaving behind a legacy of an expanded state forest are tempered by the fiscal realities of state budgets.

"Here's my fear, and what we dread here in town now," he says. "We'll get to work with another landowner and then as soon as we get everything lined to put more land in preservation, the state will say, 'Oh, we just don't have the money.' You can't really plan and make sensible progress toward the future when the state works like that."

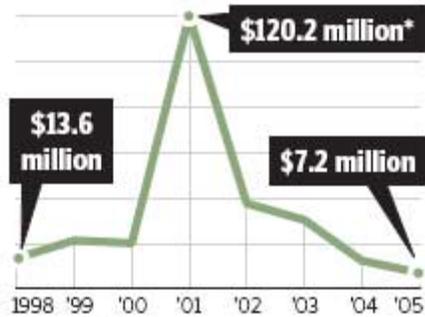
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## State Spending For Public Land

State money spent for conservation land in Connecticut has fluctuated in recent years, with 2005 marking a eight-year low. By state dollars:



\*Includes \$80 million for more than 15,000 acres of former water company land in Fairfield County.

SOURCE: The Trust for Public Land's Conservation Almanac