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## A Good Public Investment

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After seeing Republican governors in New York and New Jersey move aggressively to acquire open space in their states, Gov. John G. Rowland did the same in Connecticut.

Mr. Rowland spearheaded an open space program in 1998 whose goal was to keep 21 percent of the state's land - 673,210 acres - in open space by 2023. A separate farmland preservation program, begun in the late 1970s, was to preserve 130,000 acres of farmland.

The effort began well. From 2000 to 2003, the state spent more than \$30 million a year to acquire land or development rights. But after 2003, as The Courant recently reported, the commitment began to wane. The state spent only \$7.2 million purchasing land or development rights in 2005, a figure that improved to \$14.8 million in 2006. Town officials complain that the lack of state funding is causing potential purchases to fall through.

In most of these instances there are no second chances. No one turns subdivisions back into farms or meadows. There is tremendous development pressure on Connecticut's dwindling open land.

The state needs a broad strategy to protect its remaining open space. Purchase of land or development rights must be a major part of the plan. It's imperative that we identify the key properties to protect and go after them.

Republican state Sens. Andrew Roraback and John McKinney have proposed that \$100 million from the state's projected \$548 million surplus be earmarked for land conservation projects across the state. If you want Connecticut to look like Connecticut, support their idea.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell hasn't warmed to the proposal. She should. It is perfectly in tune with her anti-sprawl initiative, which included the creation of an Office of Responsible Growth to fight wasteful, low-density development, along with a new position of deputy commissioner of the state Department of Transportation to oversee transit-oriented development.

As the governor well understands, it will take a coordinated effort to rein in sprawl. There needs to be better planning and zoning, more housing density in town centers and transit corridors and more protection of environmentally sensitive areas. But in many instances, the only way to save a key piece of land is to buy it.

The initiative begun by Mr. Rowland in 1998 has saved about 45,000 acres of open space. Added to existing holdings, the state has saved 480,553 acres of open space, 71 percent of its goal.

The farmland program has preserved 228 farms comprising 31,782 acres, which is significant but well short of the goal of 130,000 acres.

It's imperative that we save as much of the remaining lands as possible. The Council on Environmental Quality's 2005 annual report decried the fact that the conservation rate has slowed

and said if goals continue to be deferred, "the land will not be there to conserve when the state is ready to conserve it."

Sprawl causes a number of environmental problems, from air pollution, energy waste and the loss of scenic vistas to the decline in trout, songbirds and other species due to loss of habitat. To stop this degradation, the council said, "Land is the key." It's a good investment.

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