



Connecticut State Grange

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TESTIMONY OF THE CONNECTICUT STATE GRANGE IN SUPPORT OF RAISED BILL NO. 5203, AN ACT AUTHORIZING AN AGRICULTURAL EASEMENT ON THE LANDS OF THE SOUTHBURY TRAINING SCHOOL, RAISED BILL NO. 6262, AN ACT CONCERNING THE COMMUNITY INVESTMENT PROGRAM AND RAISED BILL NO. 6263, AN ACT CONCERNING THE TRANSITION FROM THE TEN MILL PROGRAM

I am Gordon Gibson of Vernon, Vice Chair of the Board of Directors and Legislative Liaison for the Connecticut State Grange. I am speaking today in support of Raised Bill 5203, An Act Authorizing an Agricultural Easement on the lands of the Southbury Training School, Raised Bill 6262, An Act Concerning the Community Investment Program and Raised Bill No. 6263, An Act Concerning the Transition from the Ten Mill Program.

The State has an active program to preserve 130,000 acres of prime farmland by purchasing and holding the development rights to that land. The Grange recommends and encourages the State to preserve the more than 1300 acres of prime farmland it already owns on six parcels. The preservation of 1300 acres of farmland at Southbury Training School as proposed in Raised Bill No. 5203 would be a significant step in that direction and would not cost the State anything other than the staff time to complete the transaction. The bill mandates that the easement be held by a nonprofit organization dedicated to permanently protecting agricultural lands because no entity, including the State, can hold an easement on land it owns in fee simple. Connecticut Farmland Trust, Inc. is such an organization and partners with the State in preserving our valuable farmland.

The Grange also supports Raised Bill No. 6262 which would make permanent the current distribution of funds generated by the Community Investment Act which is scheduled to sunset on July 1, 2011. This sunset provision would terminate the portion of the program that provides funds to help correct a complicated federal milk pricing system which does not take into account the high cost of milk production in Connecticut. In addition to providing fresh local milk, Connecticut's dairy farms occupy over 70,000 acres of farmland which could be vulnerable to development if our dairy farms go out of business. Our dairy industry provides many full time jobs and contributes approximately \$1.1 billion annually to Connecticut's economy. In addition to assisting our dairy industry, the Community Investment Act funds which are scheduled to sunset on July 1, 2011 help develop and sustain new farm enterprises. It is one thing to preserve prime farmland from development, but we must also encourage and support its active use to raise crops to preserve it as farmland and prevent it from reverting to woodland and other natural growth. The State has many programs to encourage the development and growth of new businesses and the employment they provide. Raised Bill No. 6262 will continue the programs now in place that encourage the development and growth of new farm businesses and the employment they provide.

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The Grange supports Raised Bill No. 6263 to protect the owners of 14,000 acres of forest land enrolled in the "10 mill" program from having their land assessed at its highest and best use value over the next ten years. Many years ago Connecticut moved to protect its privately owned forests by offering the land owners a program that capped their local property taxes at 10 mills based on the then current value of the land and provided significant penalties for those who removed their land from the program for development. That program also provided that fifty years after the land was put into the program it would be reassessed at its then current market value for development. 14,000 acres of privately owned woodland will reach the fifty-year reassessment time during the next ten years.

The so-called "490 program" which mandates that farm, forest and open space property entered into the program be assessed and taxed at its current use value rather than its highest and best use had not been conceived when the "10 mill" program was created. Raised Bill No. 6263 will allow the owners of the 14,000 acres of forest land currently under the "10 mill" program to convert their land to the "490 program" as it reaches the time when it would otherwise be assessed at its highest and best use value. Without the option of this conversion many forest land owners will be forced to sell their land for development just to raise the cash needed to pay the taxes which will be levied on it at its current highest and best use value.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony.

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