CONNECTICUT LEAGUE OF CONSERVATION VOTERS EDUCATION FUND

Water & Wetlands

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are land use changes that make our communities and our waters more vulnerable to climate change. Increases in impervious surface, changes in topography, and loss of wetlands and forests are just a few examples. While individual development proposals at the town level might seem minor, these small changes can quickly accumulate, particularly when viewed within the broader context of watershed boundaries and exponential when viewed in terms of Long Island Sound.

IMPACTS

Economy

- A primary focus on expanding municipal tax base by building on every available square inch will lead to stormwater infrastructure maintenance costs and fooding issues that communities will not have the resources to manage; therefore, negating any increase in revenue and a heavier burden on municipal budgets.
- Furthermore, more frequent natural disasters are impacting property and homeowners through significant increases in insurance premiums.
    - Florida can be seen as an example. Home insurance companies view Florida as highly risky, largely due to increasingly frequent threat of destructive storms. Recently, Florida lawmakers have struggled to prevent the collapse of the home insurance market and to keep insurance premiums somewhat reasonable for homeowners.

Health & Quality of Life

- With rising temperatures, our streams are experiencing an increase in harmful algal blooms, including in drinking water supply watersheds.

Climate Change, Water, Wetlands and Natural Resources

- Climate change and increasing development pressures threaten water resources statewide. If left unchecked, impacts will be seen on personal property and a decrease in the safety and economic health of communities due to water quality degradation, flooding and drought.

Animal and Aquatic Life

- Healthy wetlands and watercourses are essential to maintaining biodiversity. Wetlands and watercourses are home to a wide range of species, including birds, fish, amphibians, and insect life. Losing these habitats significantly contributes to biodiversity loss.

CURRENT POLICY STATUS

- Connecticut's Inland Wetland and Watercourses laws and regulations need to be modernized to keep up with the impacts of climate change.
- Currently, DEEP has zero full-time staff dedicated solely to supporting the 179 volunteer Inland Wetlands Commissions (IWC) and current law requires that only one member of an IWC complete DEEP's comprehensive training program.
- Connecticut's current regulatory framework provides no specific riparian buffer protections. They are the least protective of all the New England states.
- Public Act 21-29 provides regulatory authority and responsibility over pollutant discharges into navigable waters feeling Long Island Sound thereby requiring the development of zoning strategies to control the discharge of a wide range of pollutants. This authority implicitly includes the ability to protect riparian buffers.

LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

- Create a legislative task force to produce recommendations to strengthen our Inland Wetlands and Watercourses protections in order to meet the challenges of climate change and better protect our communities. This should include incorporating specific Riparian Buffers protections into the Regulatory Framework.
- Vulnerability for downstream/downslope residents and communities must be taken into account for proposed land-use changes. Strong considerations for climate change impacts must be incorporated into our land-use decision making framework so that local commissions are provided with the regulatory tools necessary to support these decisions.
- Increase staffing at DEEP in the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses program to at least 3 dedicated staff.
- Change the required number of members of an Inland Wetlands Agency that must be trained from a minimum of one member to all members. Utilize conservation districts to assist DEEP with training.
- Expressly prohibit the merging of Inland Wetlands Commissions with Planning, Zoning, and Planning and Zoning Commissions within a municipality.
- Require taking action on wetlands violations a requirement, with certain exceptions

THREATS TO PROGRESS

- The misconception that environmental protection laws conflict with affordable housing development overlooks the importance of protecting wetlands and watercourses, which protect vulnerable communities from pollution & climate impacts.
- Prioritizing short-term gains from land use changes benefits a select few, while the long-term environmental costs are borne by everyone.

FAST FACTS

- Riparian buffers are one of the most cost-effective ways to reduce pollution from contaminated runoff or other nonpoint sources by filtering nutrients, pesticides, and animal waste.
- Riparian buffers reduce pollution and moderate stream temperatures, which lead to harmful algal blooms in surface water bodies and contribute to the hypoxic conditions in Long Island Sound.
- Riparian buffers control erosion and attenuate flooding by slowing down runoff and providing space for flood waters to go.
- Riparian buffer protection can support MS4 permitting requirements and reduce costs to towns in implementing expensive engineered green infrastructure.
- Riparian buffers and healthy wetlands and watercourses provide critical habitat for wildlife, including migratory birds.
- A recent study conducted in urban streams showed that tree canopy cover in a 5-meter riparian area was capable of reducing temperatures up to 42°F.
- The lack of consistent protections of riparian buffers contributes to the loss of headwater streams and cold-water habitat which are essential for viable native cold-water species, such as brook trout.
- CT's regulatory framework focuses on Upland Review Areas across 169 towns, with DEEP guidance requiring property-by-property decisions. Due to case law developed since the IWWA's implementation, municipal wetlands agencies must provide substantial proof to lawfully deny activities in these areas.

MORE INFORMATION

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