

**FISCAL YEAR 2008-2009 ANNUAL REPORT
CONNECTICUT RIVER GATEWAY COMMISSION**

HISTORY

In 1973, the Connecticut Legislature recognized the Lower Connecticut River Valley as one of the State's most important natural, recreational and scenic areas, and authorized establishment of the Connecticut River Gateway Commission. In July 1974, the Commission became operational with eight eligible towns, two regional planning agencies and the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection participating.

The Gateway Conservation Zone is about 30 miles long and includes those portions of its eight member towns (Chester, Deep River, East Haddam, Essex, Haddam, Lyme, Old Lyme and Old Saybrook, including the Borough of Fenwick) within view of the river. Since 1973, this area has been recognized as a unique area. The Nature Conservancy has designated the lower Connecticut River as one of its "Last Great Places"; the river's tidelands were recognized as an "internationally significant" habitat for waterfowl under the terms of the international Ramsar Convention; the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Interior has recognized the Lower Connecticut River Valley as "one of the most important ecological landscapes" in the United States; and in 1999, the River was designated as one of 14 American Heritage Rivers by the President of the United States. The State Greenways council designated the Gateway Conservation Zone as an official State Greenway in 2007.

SCENIC PRESERVATION RESPONSIBILITIES

While other organizations have concerned themselves with natural ecological systems in the river valley, this Commission has concentrated its attention on the protection of key lands along the river that contribute to the valley's scenic qualities. Since its inception, the Commission has worked with others to protect well over 1,000 acres of land through over \$1 million in gifts or purchase of scenic easements, development rights and fee simple titles. These are located in all eight towns, ranging from the estuarine marshes of Old Lyme to the heights of Mount Tom in East Haddam. More recently, the Commission assisted with a portion of the funding for purchase by the Old Saybrook Land Trust of property along the Old Saybrook waterfront, acquisition of the Roger Tory Peterson property in Old Lyme and has committed to funding the purchase of a riverfront parcel in the Town of Chester.

LAND USE OVERSIGHT RESPONSIBILITIES

Another significant role assigned to the Gateway Commission by the 1973 legislation is establishment of common zoning standards for height, setback, lot coverage and the like, which member towns have agreed to adopt and enforce within the Gateway Conservation Zone. At its monthly meetings, the Commission reviews and acts on zone changes, regulations changes and variance applications affecting land within the Conservation Zone referred to it by local boards and commissions. No zone change or change in regulations affecting land within the Conservation Zone can become effective without the Commission's approval.

The Gateway Commission officially amended its zoning standards on February 26, 2004. Revisions include a new requirement for a vegetated buffer area along the riverfront, clarification of limitations on the height of structures, and greater emphasis on blending new structures with existing topography and landscaping. In order to accomplish these goals, local Planning & Zoning Commissions are now responsible for conducting Special Permit reviews for structures in excess of 4,000 square feet in total area in order to understand and mitigate adverse impacts of

such large development on the “*natural and traditional riverway scene*”. As a courtesy, the Gateway Commission, through staff, offers to review these applications on behalf of the local Commissions at their own cost. These standards respond to continuing concerns over highly visible, large, new homes along the river bank and in the upland hills facing the river, as well as extensive tree-cutting for new development or new views for existing development.

As of June 30, 2009, Gateway member towns of Chester, Deep River, East Haddam, Haddam, Lyme, Old Lyme and Old Saybrook have incorporated the new standards into their zoning regulations as required by State Statute. Essex is the last Gateway member town to have not adopted the new standards.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Margot Burns, GIS Specialist, continues to utilize and expand the extensive GIS database originated to produce the 2004 CT River Dock Study’s Resource Sensitivity Index (RSI) maps created by J. H. Torrance Downes and the database constructed for the Ground Truthing Project (GTP) (the study and its associated maps can be obtained from the CRERPA’s web site at <http://www.crerpa.org/openspace.html>.) In another extension of the original 2004 Dock Study, Downes has assisted the Old Lyme Harbor Management Commission in developing standards for private residential docks to be included within their local Harbor Management Plan. These landmark local standards are the first of their kind to be approved by the DEP in the State of Connecticut.

With support from an EPA grant and the Gateway Commission and after much research, Judy Preston of Tidewater Institute has succeeded in developing standards for the enhanced protection of the riparian buffer areas that border the Connecticut River, its tributaries and associated wetlands. The Gateway Commission’s intent is to work on these standards with local member Commissions and land use staff to develop a set of regulations that, when adopted, will allow for increased management of these important buffer areas.

3D modeling through the use of Sketch Up and Google Earth continues to be utilized by the Commission, and staff continues working with the Pictometry data and software provided by the State. These tools allow the Gateway Commission to continue to work to expand the integration of GIS technology into their conservation efforts in order to protect the “*natural and traditional riverway scene*” of the Connecticut River, one of the Commission’s primary missions.

TIDEWATER INSTITUTE:

Besides aforementioned specific projects, the Commission will endeavor to utilize the educational resources of the Tidewater Institute to address key threats to the internationally significant natural resources of the Connecticut River Estuary. The Institute’s activities have been partially funded by the Gateway Commission over the last three years. Tidewater Institute is an independent non-profit 501(c)3 organization.

FINANCES

Until 1991, the State supported the work of the Commission with a modest annual appropriation for administrative purposes. These funds were removed from the state budget in 1992. The Commission has had no state financial support since that time and has had to rely on income from its land acquisition fund to meet its administrative costs of about \$37,000 per year. In addition, the Gateway Commission has invested almost \$15,000 this past fiscal year in support of Tidewater Institute and the pursuit of research and education in the Gateway area. Although this

past year's economic challenges impacted the Commission's funds upon which they rely, their investments have almost returned to pre-slowdown levels.

DELEGATES

Current members include: Margaret (Peggy) Wilson and Martha Wallace of Chester; Nancy Fischbach and Amy Petrone of Deep River; Harvey Thomas and Robert Boulware of East Haddam; Ellen Whaley and Fred Vollono of Essex; Susan R. Bement of Haddam, Kevin Mazer and J. Melvin Woody of Lyme; Ted Crosby of Old Lyme; Madeline Fish of Old Saybrook; Steve Williams from the Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency; Raul de Brigard and Stasia DeMichele of the Midstate Regional Planning Agency; and David Blatt of the Connecticut DEP. Fenwick Borough has been designated an ad hoc member and will be represented by Borough Warden Ethel Davis. During the past fiscal year and after many years of dedicated service, East Haddam Representative Logan Clarke and Essex Representative Ed Marlowe have stepped down from the Commission. The Commission thanks Clarke and Marlowe, for those years of service.

FUTURE DIRECTION

The Gateway Commission recognizes that they are at a turning point in their 35-plus year history. They are exploring a number of initiatives and collaborations that they feel further their mission to protect the "*natural and traditional riverway scene*" of the lower Connecticut River. Those initiatives include investigation of a regional land trust alliance, the development of riparian buffer standards, expanding their educational and outreach efforts and enhancing their stewardship efforts in the lower river valley. The Commission is also a partner in an ongoing effort to preserve the Haddam Neck site of the decommissioned Connecticut Yankee atomic power plant. As always, the Gateway Commission continues to financially support land preservation efforts where the conservation of such properties furthers their mission.

CONTACT

For more information, contact CRERPA Senior Planner J. H. Torrance Downes at (860) 388-3497. Information can also be found on the web at www.ctrivergateway.org or through a link at www.crerpa.org.