

**FISCAL YEAR 2009-2010 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. In recent years, the Commission assisted the Old Saybrook Land Trust with a portion of the funding for purchase of property along the Old Saybrook waterfront, acquisition of the Roger Tory Peterson property in Old Lyme and has committed to helping with funding toward the purchase of a riverfront parcel in the Town of Chester. In East Haddam, the Gateway Commission is in the process of donating a large parcel of Gateway-owned conservation land to the East Haddam Land Trust.

**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 vegetative 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, 2010, 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 only outstanding Gateway member town required to adopt the new standards.

### **OTHER ACTIVITIES**

In an extension of the original 2004 Dock Study and Resource Sensitivity Index (<http://www.crerpa.org/riversound.php>), J. H. Torrance Downes assisted the Old Lyme Harbor Management Commission in developing and adopting 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, Judy Preston of Tidewater Institute has developed standards for the enhanced protection of the riparian buffer areas that border the Connecticut River, its tributaries and associated wetlands. The Gateway Commission is presently reviewing their work program to determine when to recommend the adoption of the riparian buffer standards by the Gateway member towns. Adoption of new riparian buffer standards will provide increased protection of these ecologically sensitive areas.

Utilization of Google Earth has become an important means of property identification by the Commission, and staff continues working with the Pictometry data and software provided by the State. These tools allow the Gateway Commission 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.

CRERPA staffer Margot Burns has begun a collaboration of land trusts within the lower Connecticut River – the Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange (LTE) - with an eye toward a greater alliance and coordination amongst the trusts. The goal is to increase conservation effectiveness through regional collaboration without losing individual autonomy. The Gateway Commission's sister land trust – the Connecticut River Land Trust – participates in the alliance work. Find out about the Exchange at [www.crerpa.org/LandTrustCollaboration](http://www.crerpa.org/LandTrustCollaboration)

Finally, as a part of the overall effort to better serve the public, Gateway Commission staff J.H. Torrance Downes redesigned and launched the Commission's new website, which is still located at [www.ctrivergateway.org](http://www.ctrivergateway.org). The site includes the posting of photos from the lower river valley, the Gateway's development standards, state statutes governing their authority, minutes, agendas, annual reports and other pertinent information. A new section entitled "News" presents topics of interest that impact the lower river valley and its community.

### **TIDEWATER INSTITUTE:**

Besides aforementioned specific projects, the Commission utilizes the educational resources of the Tidewater Institute to address key threats to the internationally significant natural resources of the Connecticut River Estuary. In partnership with the Tidewater Institute, the Gateway Commission is in the process of updating its successful Mission Booklet, a key means of furthering the Commission's public education mission. 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 \$55,000 per year. In addition, the Gateway Commission has invested funds 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 operating funds, 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 of East Haddam; Ellen Whaley and Anthony Chirico of Essex; Susan R. Bement and Derek Turner of Haddam, J. Melvin Woody and Lisa Niccolai of Lyme; Peter Cable of Old Lyme; Madeline Fish of Old Saybrook; Steve Williams of 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 is represented by Borough Warden Ethel Davis. During the past fiscal year and after many years of dedicated service, Essex Representative Fred Vollono, Old Lyme Representative Ted Crosby, East Haddam Representative Robert Boulware and Lyme Representative Kevin (Casey) Maser have stepped down from the Commission. The Commission thanks Vollono, Crosby, Boulware and Maser for those years of service.

### **FUTURE DIRECTION**

The Gateway Commission recognizes that it is at a turning point in its 37-plus year history. The Commission will explore a number of initiatives and collaborations to further its mission to protect the "*natural and traditional riverway scene*" of the lower Connecticut River. Those initiatives include participation in the Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange (LTE), the adoption of riparian buffer standards, expanding educational and outreach efforts and enhancing 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 will continue to financially support land preservation efforts where the conservation of such properties furthers its mission.

### **CONTACT**

For more information, contact CRERPA Senior Planner and Gateway staff J. H. Torrance Downes at (860) 388-3497. Information can also be found on the web at [www.ctrivergateway.org](http://www.ctrivergateway.org) and through a link at CRERPA's website at [www.crerpa.org](http://www.crerpa.org).