

**FISCAL YEAR 2010-2011 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 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, 2011, 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. The Town of Essex is currently in discussions that may lead to the adoption of the 2004 standards into their Zoning Regulations..

OTHER ACTIVITIES

During the 2010-2011 fiscal year, the Gateway Commission was involved, and continues to be involved in two significant issues that will impact the Conservation Zone in the lower Connecticut River. First, much time and energy was spent by the Commission to voice opinion on the legislative conveyance of 17 acres of land in the Tylerville section of Haddam to a private developer. The developer was to transfer 87 acres of land they own adjacent to Conkaponsett State Forest in Haddam to the State of Connecticut in return. At issue was that the 17 acre parcel had been purchased by the State of Connecticut for the expressed purpose of conservation and use by the public. Great concern was raised by the Commission and the environmental community at large that such a legislative conveyance would result in the erosion of confidence in state government's willingness to protect conservation land that has been acquired. Of great concern was that the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection made no effort to publically oppose the conveyance.

Second, as of the end of the 2010-2011 fiscal year, the Gateway Commission was awaiting the outcome of an affordable housing application submitted for property within the Gateway Conservation Zone of Old Saybrook. The site, the Between the Bridges Marina located between the I-95 Baldwin Bridge and the Connecticut River railroad bridge, has been an active marina for over three decades. The redevelopment of the site to include the marina use, a restaurant and a residential development including affordable units would result in a slightly greater "presentation" to the river, thus creating concerns of potential deterioration of the "natural and traditional riverway scene" in that location. Offsetting the slight increase in size is the feeling that the proposed development may provide what some consider to be a much needed "facelift" to the site, thereby *improving* the river scene in that area. A decision was expected to be rendered by the Gateway Commission early in the 2011-2012 fiscal year.

3D modeling through the use of Sketch Up and Google Earth is being 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 utilize GIS technology in their conservation efforts in order to protect the "*natural and traditional riverway scene*" of the Connecticut River, the Commission's primary mission.

CRERPA environmental planner Margot Burns has continued the 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. Conservation effectiveness is the goal which is being pursued 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

As a part of the overall effort to better serve the public, Gateway Commission staff J.H. Torrance Downes continues to update design as well as information on the Commission's website, which can be found at www.ctrivergateway.org. The site includes photographs from the lower river valley, the Gateway's development standards, State statutes governing their authority, minutes, agendas, Annual Reports and other pertinent information. The "News" section of the website is used to continually update the river community on topics related to the preservation mission of the Gateway Commission.

In June of 2011, the Gateway Commission scheduled to hold their annual river tour of the Gateway Conservation Zone. Although a severe thunderstorm resulted in the cruise boat being tied to the dock for the duration, the Commission updated selected local and state dignitaries on events that occurred throughout the year that impacted or may impact the Gateway Conservation Zone. During the 2011-2012 fiscal year, the annual river cruise will be held in the late spring.

Finally, the Public Outreach Committee of the Gateway Commission completed an updated version of their Mission Booklet. The booklet has been distributed throughout the eight member towns within the Gateway Conservation Zone in locations such as local libraries, town halls and selected public venues as well as to members of the local Planning & Zoning Commissions and Zoning Boards of Appeal. In an effort to better educate the public on the mission of the Gateway Commission, Mission Booklets have also been distributed to numerous real estate agencies that represent property owners located within the Gateway Conservation Zone. Every effort is being made to have property owners be aware of the mission prior to designing residential structures and additions. The booklet can be acquired by calling staff at (860) 388-3497. During the 2011-2012 fiscal year, the booklet will be uploaded to the Gateway website.

TIDEWATER INSTITUTE:

During the 2010-2011 fiscal year, the Commission continued to utilize the educational resources previously produced by the Tidewater Institute designed to address key threats to the internationally significant natural resources of the Connecticut River Estuary. Those materials include multi-colored informational cards celebrating the protective benefits of vegetated riparian buffers. Also being considered is the proposed adoption of a set of riparian buffer regulations that were produced with a grant on behalf of the Gateway Commission. At this time, the standards will be incorporated as educational material into the Gateway Commission's website. 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 approximately \$55,000 per year. The development and printing of the Mission Booklet and the retaining of legal representation during the review of the affordable housing application process added to the Commission's expenses during the 2010-2011 fiscal year. Even with the uncertain economy that was experienced during the fiscal year, the Commission's investment portfolio made gains, thereby putting it in a good financial position for the upcoming 2011-2012 fiscal year.

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 and Suzanne Thompson 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. The Commission continues to seek representatives from the Towns of Old Saybrook and East Haddam and for CRERPA.

FUTURE DIRECTION

The Gateway continues to explore 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 participation in the Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange (LTE), continuing efforts to expand their education and outreach and the enhancement of stewardship efforts in the lower river valley by finalizing the transfer of several properties owned by the Commission to the State of Connecticut or to local conservation organizations. 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 and Gateway staff J. H. Torrance Downes at (860) 388-3497. Information can also be found on the web at www.ctrivergateway.org and through a link at CRERPA’s website at www.crerpa.org.