FISCAL YEAR 2004-2005 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) 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.

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 over 2,000 acres of land through 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. Most 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 and acquisition of the Roger Tory Peterson property in Old Lyme.

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 meeting, the Commission reviews and acts on zone changes and variance applications affecting land within the Conservation Zone referred to it by local boards and commissions. No zone change within the Conservation Zone can become effective without the Commission's approval.

During the past year the Commission completed efforts to update its zoning standards and officially amended those 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. These proposed standards are in response to continuing concerns over highly visible large new homes along the river bank and in the upland hills facing the river, and extensive tree-cutting for new development or new views for existing development.

As of June 30, 2005, Gateway member towns of Haddam, Chester, Deep River and Lyme have incorporated the new standards into their zoning regulations as required by State Statute.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

The Commission helped organize and present a series of informational forums about the Connecticut River. The "Charting the Course" series originated with a forum on docks organized by the Connecticut River Museum. Other forums have included a meeting to elicit public concerns about river issues, a panel discussion on economic issues, which included representatives of tourism and marine trades, and a panel of design professionals discussing the scenic values of the river.

Margot Burns, GIS Specialist, has completed work on a grant that was sponsored by the Gateway and the Long Island Sound Fund administered by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection entitled "Conservation Easements: What You Need to Know." This project created basic educational materials on acquiring conservation easements and emphasized the importance of stewardship. A GIS database has been created of all conservation easements located within the eight towns of the Gateway. Other GIS layers created for the Connecticut River Gateway Zone as part of the residential dock study include: current land use of shoreline parcels; canoe and kayak access points; distance of travel from canoe and kayak access points; public viewing locations of the river; and visual assessment of docks from public viewing locations. A GIS database is also being created from the Resource Sensitivity Index (RSI) maps created by J. H. Torrance Downes for the dock study. It is being funded through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection.

TIDEWATER INSTITUTE:

A new initiative designed to address key threats to the internationally significant natural resources of the Connecticut River Estuary has been created by Judy Preston and is funded through the winter of 2005 by the Gateway Commission. Judy has created a booklet "Protecting the Character of the Lower Connecticut River, The Gateway Commission's Mission" with funding from DEP's Long Island Sound Fund. She is currently assembling and mapping, with GIS help from Margot Burns, and funding from the EPA, the current status of riparian buffers in the Gateway region.

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 $15,000 per year.

DELEGATES

Current members include: Margaret Wilson and Christine Nelson of Chester; Irwin Wilcox and Nancy Fischbach of Deep River; Robert Boulware and Logan Clarke of East Haddam; Fred Vollono and Edward Marlowe of Essex; Susan R. Bement and Scott B. Thompson of Haddam, Kevin Mazer and J. Melvin Woody of Lyme; Rudi Besier and

Ted Crosby of Old Lyme; Madeline Fish and David LeMay of Old Saybrook; Alan Bayreuther and Doris Sanstrom 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 is currently represented by Chuck Chadwick.

The Gateway Commission is staffed by planners from the Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency. Updated information including meeting minutes and current standards can be found on the web at crerpa.org under “river and sound” projects.