



**Connecticut Equity and Environmental Justice Advisory Council (CEEJAC)
Land Subcommittee Meeting Minutes
Thursday, April 24, 2025; 1:00 PM-2:30 PM**

Link to recording:

<https://ctdeep.zoom.us/rec/share/zUhZYWzGFrIpnlEX35ORj7qarFgoWY8VQhr2gPqUJvHiknaFHGAdCnELRhtyWA3B.a2qchhq03es9f1dW>

This is a public meeting and will be recorded and posted on the [Connecticut Equity and Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#) website.

Disclaimer: Please note this is not a word for word translation

I. Welcome

II. CT Green Plan and Open Space Initiatives

Presented by Lindsay Suhr, CT DEEP Land Acquisition and Management Director

Back in the 90s the general assembly was seeing development pressure on land across CT which prompted them to set acreage goals and set requirements of development through the state's Green Plan. The plan identifies key green areas in the state.

In 2001 DEEP developed the first Green Plan in partnership with municipalities, other agencies, and conservation organizations. The last update was in 2015-2016 with an expiration of 2020. DEEP experienced a retirement cliff in 2020 and their office has seen a lot of turnover and changes so about a year and a half ago kicked off starting to move this forward. Aiming to get the Green Plan updated by 2026.

21% Goal in statute: 10% to be acquired by DEEP/state. 11% to be acquired by land conservation partners. In the beginning they did a good job of understanding what open space looked like across all entities and communities but for the last twenty years they have not been tracking any conservation happening outside of what DEEP helps protect. From what they have been tracking they say that they are 76% on the way to the 21% goal but think this is an overestimation. The data is not accurate, but hope to get a more accurate picture.

Open space and watershed land acquisition Grant Program (OSWA) – \$15 million in the last couple of years and estimate the same for this year given for local land acquisition. Other DEEP programs include:

- Urban Green and Community Garden Program
- Land and water conservation fund program
- Outdoor recreation legacy partnership program

- Highlands Conservation Act funding
- New grant program through remediation team

Importance for local efforts: A lot of local plans for conservation and development relay back to the DEEP Green Plan. Local organizations and nonprofits look to DEEP to help set priorities and that is what the Green Plan has done in the past. This plan identifies areas of needs or resources of needs. DEEP has been working for the last 18 months to move this plan forward and be able to have the next round of Green Plan drafted. An issue is there is no statutory definition for open space. When you look at municipality or state plan definitions of open space they differ. This round they want to set a definition, at least for the Green Plan, and if local partners do not follow it that is fine but at least DEEP is setting that definition. Had multiple conversations with a working group and the public to come up with a definition.

They started doing a review of the old plan: What they like, what history can they regurgitate, what parts do they not like and can tweak. They have also reviewed the plans of others. Started to outline new ideas for the new plan's template. Worked with state GIS office that does mapping projects across the state to pull existing information – have a baseline of all the properties that could potentially be considered open space. Starting to pull that data and make it accessible. Next step is to hire a consultant but a little in a stand still because state budget concerns but hoping by later summer can hire a consultant to finalize open space data of the state.

Open space definition: In order for land to be considered open space it must:

1. Meet one of the following
 - Be protected from development by a conservation restriction held by a qualified conservation organization
 - Be owned in fee by a qualified conservation organization or water company

AND

2. Be restricted, protected, or used for one of the following purposes
 - To maintain or enhance the conservation of natural or scenic resources
 - To protect natural streams or a water supply
 - To promote healthy soils
 - To promote the conservation of wetlands, beaches or tidal marshes
 - To enhance public outdoor recreation opportunities
 - To preserve historic property or agricultural lands

Vulnerabilities:

- Definition will be used to collect data on a specific moment in time.
- Some of these lands will be vulnerable to conservation.
- Categorize – high, low, virtually no vulnerability.
- DEEP consultant to collect data on current state of 21% including vulnerability.

Other related state plans include the Conversation and Development Policies Plan, Wildlife Action Plan, Forest Action Plan, GC3 Phase 1 Report and Subcommittee Recommendations, Hazard Mitigation Plan, Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program Plan, Coastal and Estuarine

Land Conservation Program Plan, Connecticut Environmental Literacy Plan, Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

Pulled data by ownership names. Properties owned by land trusts, municipalities, and the state were all captured by the state GIS office when they did data pull. What is missing is conservation easements on private lands and did not cull bad data. Consultant will work to finish updating the open space data across CT. They will also work with local nonprofits, municipalities, and COGS to rectify data. The consultant will analyze based on census data and will identify open space gaps, inequities, resource protection gaps, recreation needs, etc. DEEP will set goals for the new plan based on the updated mapping and analysis.

Timeline has changed many times, but hope is they can start working with the consultant towards the end of summer and through beginning of next year. When they have data analysis, they can start setting goals and get public input from groups including COGS, CEEJAC subcommittee, etc. Will have regular public meetings in the Spring.

How can you help? Participate in public input sessions. Send along example projects that they could highlight in the plan. What else should DEEP consider? Can contact Lindsay Suhr at suhr@ct.gov

Open Discussion and Q&A

Mary Pelletier – Is there embedded in the criteria something about conversation to protect communities from flooding?

- Lindsay Suhr (CT DEEP): Steve Perry (CT DEEP) has been diving into state plans and will be pulling that into some of the goals going forward. Land protections include riparian areas. Some of this data will help DEEP identify where some of the gaps exist and how we can do a better job.

Mary Pelletier – State of CT owns a lot of land. The extension school in West Hartford has been turned over. Instead of giving up on these lands, could DEEP conserve them?

- Lindsay: Some of the lands, like the ones in Hartford, aren't DEEP owned but they are talking with state agencies about acquiring lands. Potentially it will touch on that but will be a smaller portion of what is talked about in the Green Plan. The plan focuses less on management of land but more on opportunities for land acquisitions. Sometimes environmental review team chimes into projects but it depends on the project.

Ashley Stewart – The Green Bank has been doing assessment plans for the cities that have talked about the needs park wise, assets. Are you all planning to use some of those existing plans? They partnered with community organizations to create those plans to ensure they consider their needs.

- Lindsay: Open to having more conversations about that and would like to see their work.
- Steven Perry: Ashley, would you be able to direct me to those plans? Steven.Perry@ct.gov

Ashley Stewart – Language-wise, think about other terms to use along with open space. The term open space makes sense for us on the call, but this could be a barrier for public engaging in conversations.

- Lindsay: Welcomes a follow-up conversation on this and the work the Green Bank has been doing.

[Unknown] – How does DEEP plan to ensure historically underserved communities with limited access green space are being considered in the definition of open space?

- Lindsay: Recognizes that is something DEEP did not do great job in past Green Plans. The goal is to have more conversations about this. A big goal for the consultant is to understand across the landscape what does the open space look like and use available data to ensure we identify these underserved communities that haven't received grant funding, don't have municipal parks, etc. and then have more conversations with communities about what they would like to see. Trying to do a better job and to identify where they can have those conversations with local communities to find locations that need protection. Last year they made updates to the statutes for their open space program and are trying to make changes to the urban community garden program to make it easier for communities to use funding. Sometimes communities couldn't access the funding in the past because too many barriers. Included EJ communities in the statute. Trying to make those tweaks to statutes and policies. Making efforts but always willing to have conversations on how they could do a better job.

Maisa Tisdale – The way urban development was done in the area a lot of neighborhoods have been cut off from others and each one has a unique historic story. The idea was to create pocket parks with walking ways between them. Is this something that might be open space?

- Lindsay: Yes. How to make sure small spaces in urban areas are considered open space and protected going forward? Trying to do a better job of tweaking things to ensure they qualify for grant funding.
- Steven: The Urban Green and Community Garden Grant Program has a goal of building out pocket parks and small community gardens. They are starting another round sometime in the next two months or so. Steven is the point of contact for that program and encouraged people to reach out.

Ashley Stewart – Do you plan to change this in the Green Plan cycle? Some of the communities hoping to engage in and reach across the state likely are not the ones who know how to navigate the system. Maybe use mapping to be proactive and seek out projects instead.

- Lindsay: Yes, and no. They anticipate that they will have a better sense of locations where they are looking to acquire property, and it will be helpful for prioritizing locations for their grant program and identifying locations for state protections. The problem is that there is one staff member doing all these programs. Not enough resources to do enough outreach as much as they would like. The one helpful thing will be that with some of the grant program they can work with partners to identify locations and prioritize their efforts.

Ashley Stewart – Highlighting the areas you would like to target so at least when the Green Plan is updated, all stakeholders can help identify the DEEP staff member identify those areas.

Yaw Darko – Will DEEP set aside funding for those communities that do not have as much open space as the other communities identified?

- Lindsay: I don't know but it would make sense. It would be helpful to have conversations with legislators where they identify areas and ask for more funding. That is the goal but cannot promise it because she will not ultimately make that decision.

Mary Pelletier – One concern is long term maintenance and need to update plans. All for pocket parks but one big issue they are seeing is trees not being watered. The mortality rate of new trees being planted, just because of maintenance, is a big concern. Are you looking at this with a lens with long-term, sustainability, and how nature itself can sustain itself in terms of municipal money?

- Lindsay: Will be looking at funding sources and long-term maintenance.

Mary Pelletier – Riparian North branch – tributaries – non-navigable tributaries can be dangerous and difficult to maintain. Wondering if a gradient of maintenance is needed? How do you balance those – is there a gradient or metrics?

- Lindsay: Will be having multiple goals – one for outdoor access, recreation, etc.

Yaw Darko – What is the DEEP willing to protect or acquire?

- Lindsay: That gets tricky. DEEP struggles with resources sometimes. Not a lot of state or DEEP protections in urban communities. Open to doing protection in other communities but need resources to have ENCON officers, maintenance staff, etc. Sometimes there are communities where there is no DEEP property or office within 20-25 miles and difficult to have staff be at that site as much as they can. Traditionally, it's been things close by or adjacent to DEEP properties. Do not do isolated parcels but that might be where grant funding can go to those. Ensure funding is more accessible.

Mary Pelletier – Upstream municipalities have nice land but making development decisions that are impacting downstream communities by replacing wetlands with big box stores. Is there anything that can call that out from a watershed perspective? Appears that not just equity but also urban design component that has never been entered into the calculations of the state.

- Lindsay: Good point to bring up and share with them.