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July 29, 2020

Chairman Abney and Members
House Finance Committee
State House
Providence, RI 02903

**Re: Budget – Article 5 – Question 2 – Beach, Clean Water and Green Bond:
Requesting a \$4 million Amendment to Continue the State’s Local Open Space Grant Program**

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

Rhode Island’s land trust community is asking the General Assembly to close a gap in the bond referendum proposed by Governor Raimondo by including \$4 million in Article 5, Question 2 so that the Local Open Space Grant Program can continue. This competitive grant program has a long and successful track record since it was initiated in 1985. In fact, the 1985 bond was called the “Open Space Bond.” These state grants leverage funds from other sources such as municipalities, foundations and private donors. In February 2020, \$3,332,260 in open space grants were awarded to 16 projects that conserved 904 acres with total project cost of \$8,704,200. **Few state bond-funded programs have this level of match, impact and effective track record.**

We understand that the Local Open Space Grant Program has about \$2,000,000 remaining after the grants awarded this year. RIDEM usually conducts a grant round every other year to award \$5,000,000 in grants for local conservation projects. Thus, **bond funding is necessary to continue this successful program.**

State bond funding for land conservation creates permanent community assets that increase in value over time. Land conservation strengthens the state’s economy and, in particular, the tourism, outdoor recreation and agriculture industries.

COVID-19 is demonstrating the importance of the state’s land conservation program. Open space lands and trails are getting unprecedented use. They are providing Rhode Islanders with places where they can get welcome respite from cabin fever and the stress and anxiety created by these uncertain times. Since March, the number of people getting trail information from the Council’s ExploreRI.org website has been 300% higher than the same period last year. Trail counters also document an increase of 2 to 3 times the number of people walking on land trust trails this year compared to last year.

The Local Open Space Grants program provides land trusts and municipalities with core funding to protect the special places in our communities. Land trusts never know when the properties that should be conserved in a community will become available. When properties do become available, Local Open Space Grants provide critical funding that makes conservation possible.

We appreciate your consideration of this request. Please let me know if you have questions about the Local Open Space Grant program or related bond funding.

Sincerely,

Rupert Friday
Director

Background: The Rhode Island Land Trust Council is a coalition of over 45 land trusts – community based organizations throughout Rhode Island that are working to protect the special places, open space lands and farmlands that define the character of our State.