



Preserving the Island's open spaces for the lasting benefit of all.

February 15, 2022

Chairman Marvin L. Abney
House Finance Committee
RI State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903
Submitted to Housefinance@rilegislature.gov

**RE: Governor's FY 2023 Budget (H7123); Article 5 Question 3 – Green Economy Bonds
Request to include and increase funds for farmland and open space conservation in Green
Economy Bond**

Dear Chairman Abney and House Finance Committee members,

On behalf of the Aquidneck Land Trust, a Rhode Island non-profit that has preserved nearly 2,700 acres of open space on Aquidneck Island across the towns of Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth, we respectfully ask to include and increase funding in the Green Economy Bond for preservation of farmland and open spaces as outlined below.

While the Green Economy Bond includes a number of beneficial projects, there is unfortunately a lack of funding designated to the conservation of our important farmlands and open spaces at a time when saving these places is more urgent than ever. State funds from previous green economy bonds have been vital in saving important farmlands, habitat areas, watershed protection lands, and parks and trails across the state. Protecting these lands add to our communities in the ecosystem services they provide, help contribute to our local economy, provide mental and physical health benefits via recreational opportunities, and make our communities more resilient to climate change. The state also gets a great return on its money due to matching programs with private money raised and provided by local land trusts. With the pandemic over the last few years, there has only been more demand for open spaces in our communities (we have seen 2.5x more use on our trails pre versus post pandemic), yet there is less money in the bond for open space than in previous years.

We are in support of the following measures:

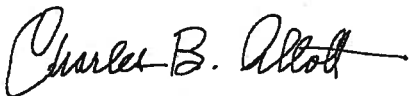
- Add \$3 million to the bond for the state's Agricultural Land Preservation Commission ("ALPC") to protect important farms across the state
 - Funding for ALPC has been a staple of the Green Economy Bond for years. Farming and agricultural related business is an important driver in the Rhode Island economy. In the

current bond, there is no funding dedicated specifically to farm conservation. This program has a decades-long track record of success. We believe there should be specific funding for ALPC to continue its great work protecting farms across the state in partnership with local land trusts.

- Increase the State Land Acquisition Program's allotment from \$3 million to \$5 million dollars
 - The current budget includes farmland in this funding bucket, which would dilute and backlog a number of projects. This program was also not funded in the last Green Economy Bond, providing a further backlog of projects. Furthermore, while there is \$3 million for Forest Restoration (3c), this is for maintaining current forests, not to acquire or protect additional forests. More funding in the program would help ensure sufficient funds to conserve our forests, open spaces, watersheds, and recreation lands.
- Increase the Local Land Acquisition Matching Grant Program from \$2 million to \$3 million dollars
 - The Local Open Space grant program has been vital to our work on Aquidneck Island, and for many land trusts across the state. Just in the last four years, we have used it to save three properties with partners and matched the state's funds on the acquisition. These properties included a wildlife preserve and trail system, a park in Newport, and a historic farmland in Portsmouth. Increasing the allotment to \$3 million will make a significant difference to allow RIDEM to fund high quality projects with land trusts and municipalities.

We believe Rhode Islanders care about their open spaces across the state -- on Aquidneck Island we have seen firsthand how much people care about the local farms here, the trails they walk their dog on every weekend, and the parks where they picnic, birdwatch, and socialize. Saving land is also a natural way to make us more resilient to climate change. We hope you agree the State should make sure open space conservation is a priority in the Green Economy Bond.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



Charles B. Allott, Esq.
Executive Director