



Why Connecticut Needs a Constitutional Amendment to Protect State Property By Liz Raisbeck and Eugenia Villagra

Photo by E. Villagra

The Mystic Education Center, formerly known as the Mystic Oral School.

One of the many wonderful things about life in the beautiful State of Connecticut, the land of steady habits, is the comforting knowledge that when we visit one of our state parks or wildlife areas, those lands are set aside “in perpetuity,” for all time.

You may be surprised to find out that according to a report from the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) titled [“Preserved but Maybe Not: Impermanence of State Constitution Lands”](#), “[r]ecent proposals to exchange or convey state parks, forests and wildlife areas totaling hundreds of acres have highlighted weaknesses in the protections granted to Connecticut’s conservation lands. These weaknesses could result in the sudden ‘unpreservation’ and subsequent development of those lands...” Maybe not so steady after all.

Last spring a coalition of concerned citizens and environmental organizations, including GOSA, launched a letter-writing campaign urging the Connecticut legislature to pass a constitutional amendment to set the bar higher for such land conveyances.

The General Assembly took the first step last May to plug this huge loophole in state law regarding land preservation thanks to the hundreds of letters that poured into the legislature from all over the state, including many from you. [Senate Joint Resolution 36](#) (S.J. 36), which passed both chambers on the last day of the session, would establish that to make a

land conveyance 1) there must be a public hearing on any proposal to convey state lands to another party, and 2) the legislature must produce a two-thirds majority vote on each property voted on.

S.J. 36 received the required three-fourths majority vote in the Senate, but only a simple majority vote in the House. Under the rules for a constitutional amendment, the same resolution must be passed by the General Assembly in the 2017 or 2018 session for it to appear on the ballot in November, 2018. The passage of S.J. 36 was an important victory, a critical step forward. We will be keeping our members and friends apprised of the next step on this journey and asking for your support again.

Meanwhile, closer to home, GOSA is keeping an eye on developments with the state-owned Mystic Education Center in Groton. The 114-acre property, formerly the Mystic Oral School, is controlled by two state agencies: the Department of Administrative Services (DAS), which administers 48 acres, and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), which administers 66 acres. Last March, GOSA learned that the state planned to gift the DAS acres to Groton by means of the 2016 Conveyance Act—without a local public hearing—exactly the scenario described by the CEQ. Even though the letter-writing campaign and the advocacy of Rep. André Bumgardner resulted in the removal of the Groton conveyance from the bill, the “For Sale” sign on the DAS-owned property, up since 2011, is still up; fortunately, we recently confirmed that DEEP will retain and protect its all-forested portion.

[A July article in The Day](#) revealed that economic development officials from Groton and the state are now planning to market more actively the DAS portion of the Center’s land to a prospective developer. It is important that there be a full public process as these plans go forward.



Photo by E. Villagra