

Murphy's Efforts Paying off on Open Space and the Environment; Litchfield County Landmarks Slated for Funding

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WASHINGTON, D.C. –Congressman Chris Murphy's (CT-5) efforts as Chairman of the Congressional Land Conservation Caucus are paying off. Today, the House of Representatives passed the Fiscal Year 2008 Interior and the Environment Appropriations bill with historic increases in land conservation funding. The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) have not been given a funding increase since President Bush took office. To reverse that trend, Murphy urged the House Appropriations Committee to increase funding for these programs so that the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area, Skiff Mountain in Kent, and other Fifth District treasures could be protected.

"Renewing our commitment to protecting the unique character of towns and villages across northwest Connecticut is a top priority for me. I couldn't be happier that this appropriations bill includes funding increases for land conservation. There is a lot more work to do, but today we are taking the first step toward reversing some of the neglect," said Murphy.

In 2006, 29 towns in Connecticut and Massachusetts were designated as the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area, making it eligible for the first time this year for federal funds for conservation efforts and recreational activities. Skiff Mountain in Kent, which provides habitat for important species, has been eligible for federal conservation dollars for three years, and this year is the first time it may receive funding.

When Murphy arrived in Washington, he learned that since 2001, the funding for EPA has fallen by 29 percent and funding for the Interior Department, which administers the LWCF and the FLP, has fallen by 16 percent. Special places in Connecticut's Fifth District, including the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area and Skiff Mountain, rely on these programs for protection. This bill could begin to reverse the decline in funding as it provides a 4.3 percent increase over FY 2007.

The House Interior and Environment Appropriations bill includes \$581,000 specifically for Skiff Mountain protection. Increases for the overall Forest Legacy program could provide an additional \$189,000 for the property. The bill doubles the investment in the Heritage Partnership program, which should lead to first time funding for the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage area in northern Litchfield County. And LWCF state grants, which could support open space preservation in Connecticut, are funded at \$50 million – the President had requested zero funds for this program in his budget request to Congress.

"While this is all good news for the Fifth District of Connecticut, the fight isn't over. The process for passing spending bills is lengthy, and these dollar amounts could likely change once the Senate and the President gets involved. Passage of today's bill does not mean the check is in the mail – and I will continue to push for these investments until the President signs the bill," said Murphy.

During the course of the debate on the bill, Murphy obtained assurances from the Chairman of the Interior Appropriations subcommittee that he would work with Murphy to find ways to alleviate the burden on local land trusts, such as those that work in Litchfield County. These trusts are dealing with increasingly complicated regulations mandated by the IRS without any additional resources from the federal government.

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