

# Rhode Island Land Trust Council

## 2023 Legislative Wrap-Up

In the early morning hours of Saturday, June 17th, the General Assembly adjourned, and the 2023 legislative session ended. This year, the Rhode Island Land Trust Council (RILTC) **tracked 87 individual bills** with the potential to impact land trusts and land conservation in the State. This year saw **significant legislative wins** that impact our work, summarized below. Without the strong support and grassroots efforts of our land trusts, farmers, forest stewards, and recreational trail users, and our successful coalition building with other organizations, these tremendous successes would not have been possible.

### Farmland Preservation Funding

[House Bill 6018](#) (Rep. McGaw) & [Senate Bill 560](#) (Chairman Louis DiPalma)

Farmland protection efforts (through the Agricultural Land Preservation Commission, or ALPC) are traditionally funded through State Green Bond efforts. Unfortunately, funding for this work was left out of the last bond issue, leaving the balance of the farmland preservation account dangerously close to zero. This year, we advocated for \$5 Million to be appropriated from the Governor's FY24 Budget to replenish the nearly empty fund so that the ALPC could continue working to conserve the state's most important farmland.



Due to the leadership of the bill sponsors, Representative McGaw and Chair DiPalma, and strong advocacy efforts of RILTC, in partnership with the RI Food Policy Council and Conservation Districts, and nearly 100 farmers and land trust members, we made a clear case for the critical need for this funding. \$2.5 Million was appropriated from the General Fund to continue the State's farmland protection program! This is a historic win for farmland preservation.

### Liability for Outdoor Recreation on Municipal & State Properties

[House Bill 5363](#) (Chairman Craven)

If passed, this legislation would eliminate liability protections and increase risk and insurance costs for cities and towns. This legislation raises significant concerns among the 19 municipal land trusts that have properties that are open to the public for outdoor recreation. This bill died in committee.

Thank you to the dozens of individuals and organizations who submitted testimony and showed up in person to testify against this legislation. In addition to land trusts, we were joined by the Rhode Island Hiking Club, Back Country Hunters & Anglers, and the Narragansett Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club.



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## Conservation Easements (“Liberal Interpretation”)

[House Bill 5914](#) (Chairman Craven) & [Senate Bill 418](#) (Chairman DiPalma)

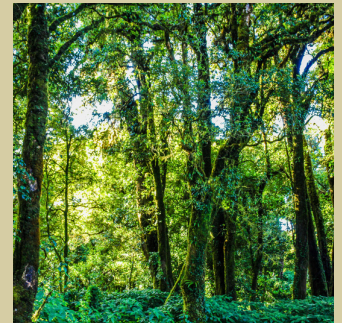
The “Liberal Interpretation” bill, initiated for RILTC, was signed into law by Governor McKee on May 18th. First introduced in 2019, this bill adds language to our enabling legislation for conservation easements, giving the basis for courts to uphold the conservation values of easements if there is ever a dispute in court. Thank you to Chairman Craven and Chairman DiPalma for their leadership in getting this important legislation across the finish line!



## Solar Siting Reform & Forest Conservation

[House Bill 5853 Sub A](#) (Rep. Speakman) & [Senate Bill 684 Sub A](#) (Chairwoman DiMario)

After six years, comprehensive solar siting reforms were finally passed out of the House and Senate, and are off to Governor McKee. These solar siting reforms prohibit state financial incentives for solar development in forested blocks of over 250 acres, or "core forests." Over the last decade, over 2,000 acres of forests have been permanently converted in core forests for solar. The law also increases renewable energy programs and encourages their development in previously disturbed areas like parking lots, rooftops, and closed landfills.



Moving solar incentives from our state's important forests is only the first step. Over the next year, we will continue to advocate for funding to ensure that these forests are conserved for future generations. RILTC served as a member in the coalition of organizations working to reach a compromise on this bill. We thank Representative June Speakman and Chairwoman Alana DiMario for their leadership in ensuring that Rhode Island is leading in innovative solutions related to conservation and renewable energy!

## Preventing Captive Hunting

[House Bill 5864](#) (Rep. Slater) & [Senate Bill 607](#) (Senator LaMountain)

Captive Hunting involves hunting animals within fenced areas. It is common for animals like wild boar or elk that are bred elsewhere to be transported across state lines prior to the hunt, which poses significant conservation concerns. Imported animals interact with native wildlife through fencing, spreading serious diseases like Chronic Wasting Disease. In places where wild boar were introduced, they have escaped into the local environment, becoming the most expensive invasive species in North America.



This year, RILTC supported the advocacy efforts of the New England Chapter of the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers to pass legislation that would prohibit the practice of captive hunting in Rhode Island. This bill passed unanimously in the House, but died in committee in the Senate.



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## Representing Land Conservation in Policy Discussions

In addition to our work on legislation, RILTC has been appointed to represent the land conservation community on several State committees & commissions. These include the State Forest Conservation Commission, Rhode Island's 2030 Food Strategy (on behalf of farmland access & preservation), and the [Legislative Study Commission](#) to Evaluate & Provide Recommendations on Proper Forest Management for Fire Prevention. RILTC Director Kate Sayles also represents the Southern RI Conservation District on the Rhode Island State Conservation Committee.



## Other 2023 Priority Updates

**The Bottle Bill:** RILTC worked as a member of the coalition working to pass a bottle bill in Rhode Island this year. This bill would add a refundable \$0.10 deposit on containers, and shift the responsibility for recycling to producers. While this bill did not move this year, a joint legislative study commission was formed to work on the bill for passage in 2024.

**Environmental Education & Workforce Development:** In 2023, RILTC supported the advocacy efforts of the Rhode Island Environmental Education Association (RIEEA) to promote educational programming and workforce development related to climate change and the blue and green economy. While these bills did not move out of committee this year, we look forward to continuing to advocate for this important legislation next year.

**Tax Exemptions for Small & Urban Farmers:** RILTC worked closely with Senator Mack & the RI Food Policy Council on legislation that would define small (under 5 acres) and urban farms, and provide those farms with tax exemptions. While these bills did not pass out of committee, we are preparing legislation for next year.

**Funding for Conservation Districts:** RILTC supported efforts to appropriate additional funding to the State's three quasi-public Conservation Districts and the RI State Conservation Committee. The Districts work to ensure that Rhode Island land trusts and landowners have what they need to ensure the protection of our vital natural resources. An additional \$100,000 was appropriated from the General Fund this session.



Email: [ksayles@rilandtrusts.org](mailto:ksayles@rilandtrusts.org)  
Phone: (401) 212-0832

