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Urgent action needed to preserve RI's green space | Opinion

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Recently, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management awarded \$2.6 million for the protection of 11 critical open spaces across Rhode Island. These grants, made possible by the 2022 Green Bond, signify a crucial investment in preserving our natural environment, enhancing recreational opportunities, and safeguarding the ecological health of Rhode Island.

However, these funds are now fully expended, and there is currently no funding allocated for the Local Open Space Grant Program in the proposed Green Bond. Without additional state investment, the important conservation successes achieved through this program will grind to a halt, and no additional grants will be available for at least three years, likely longer.

More: Advocates trying to restore funding for open space and farmland protection in green bond

Since 1985, the Local Open Space Grant Program has been instrumental in protecting over 13,000 acres of land, ensuring that these vital natural assets remain accessible to the public for activities such as camping, fishing, hiking, and more. These conserved landscapes not only contribute to Rhode Island's tourism economy but also play a pivotal role in bolstering our state's climate resilience and supporting local businesses.

The urgency of this matter cannot be overstated. Without the infusion of \$16 million into the Green Bond during this legislative session, the vital work of preserving our green spaces will be severely hindered. Municipalities, land trusts, and nonprofit organizations rely on Green

Bond programs like the Local Open Space Grant Program to leverage significant federal and philanthropic matching funds for projects that benefit our communities and our environment. For every \$1 invested by the state, conservation organizations are able to receive an additional \$1.70 in funding from those sources.

Conservation efforts that were recently funded through the Local Open Space Grant Program do not compete with addressing the affordable housing crisis. Rather, they complement our state's broader goals of sustainable development and improved quality of life for all residents. Preserving open spaces not only enhances our physical well-being but also contributes to the social and economic vitality of our state.

More: Advocates want open space funding in new green bond. McKee's office says it conflicts with housing.

It is imperative that our legislators recognize that investing in Rhode Island's natural infrastructure is just as important as investing in our economic infrastructure. By allocating \$16 million to the Green Bond, we will ensure the continuation of the conservation initiatives that are vital to our state's future, protecting Rhode Island's important farmland, beautiful open spaces, and forests.

All Rhode Islanders deserve a safe, healthy, and affordable place to live with access to clean air, clean water, outdoor recreation, and healthy local food. We urge our elected officials to act swiftly to secure the necessary funding for the preservation of our green spaces by making the Green Bond Greener. Together, we can safeguard Rhode Island's important open spaces for generations to come, ensuring that our state remains a vibrant and thriving place to live, work, and play.