



The Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Zone and the Connecticut River Gateway Commission

The lower Connecticut River valley is the last important river estuary on the eastern seaboard of the United States that remains unspoiled. It combines the natural beauty of broad marshlands and high wooded ridges with the charm of historic farm houses and villages. Due to a sandbar at its mouth, the estuary has escaped the indiscriminate industrial and maritime development that has blighted the estuaries and shores of so many major rivers with oil refineries, tank farms and refuse dumps.

But in the late 1960s, local residents and local and state and federal officials began to fear that indiscriminate recreational and residential development might destroy the very natural and aesthetic advantages that make the valley such an attractive place to live and visit, to hunt and fish and sail.

Creation of the Conservation Zone

Recognizing that the Connecticut River Estuary is a unique and precious resource for the entire state, the Connecticut General Assembly authorized the creation of the Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Zone in 1973. The purpose of the conservation zone is to protect the natural, historic and aesthetic values of the lower Connecticut River. The zone encompasses riverside portions of Chester, Deep River, East Haddam, Essex, Haddam, Lyme, Old Lyme and Old Saybrook. All of these towns voted at town meetings to join in an effort to protect the Connecticut valley by guiding future development through common zoning, planning and development criteria and by purchasing scenic easements and development rights on visually important parts of the landscape. Each town sought the help of the regional compact in their local protective efforts.

The Connecticut River Gateway Commission

The legislature established the Connecticut River Gateway Commission to oversee the conservation zone. Each town elects a delegate and an alternate to the commission, which also includes a representative of the Connecticut Commissioner of Energy and Environmental Protection and a representative of the Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments, which serves the eight towns. The Commission is charged with overseeing any changes in town plans of development, zoning and subdivision regulations that might adversely affect the river scene. That role has been exercised judiciously and reasonably over the years. The mere presence of the Gateway organization serves to promote and sustain a consciousness of the riverway as a valuable public resource. Although the Commission consists primarily of local residents because they are best able to oversee development, it acts on behalf of all the people of Connecticut and all those who enjoy the beauty of the area.

Gateway's Two Paths of Protection

As authorized by state statute, the Gateway Commission uses two paths to protect the "*natural and traditional riverway scene*" in the Lower Connecticut River. First is the land acquisition program that has been so successful in preserving mostly undeveloped land, and second is its regulatory program which guides mostly residential development so as to minimize the visual impact of such development on the river scene.

Acquisition of Scenic Easements, Development Rights and Land

The Gateway Commission's acquisition program has received national attention for its innovative approach to preserving scenic areas along the river. To date, the Gateway Commission has acquired easements and fee land protecting almost 1,100 acres valued at well in excess of \$10 million. Indeed, just because the program of purchasing development rights is so innovative, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection has never been able to obtain appraisals of the monetary value of those rights that were high enough to persuade owners to sell scenic rights to the state, as the legislature originally intended. Most of these acquisitions, whether in the form of full ownership or development rights and scenic easements have been acquired through gifts, at no cost to the State of Connecticut. But as the value of land along the river has escalated, the

Commission has had to purchase land by itself and with partners. The Commission is grateful to the legislature for its support of this program and hopes that it will continue to further the original plan to acquire easements on up to 2,500 acres along the lower river.

Management of Development

As a conservation agency, Gateway is unique in that the governing statutes provide authority for acquisition of easements and developments rights, but they also provide authority for Gateway to act as a regulatory land commission as well. It is the regulatory side of Gateway's work with which most property owners and their representatives are familiar.

Since a path of acquisition of scenic easements, development rights and land is not always possible and because much of the land is zoned residential and in private ownership, the majority of Gateway's day-to-day operations involved staff consultation with property owners and their site engineers and architects on development projects. With the Gateway zoning standards adopted into each Gateway town's zoning regulations, projects that meet the local zoning regulations are presumed to be consistent with the Gateway mission.

In order to confirm consistency, the Zoning Enforcement Officers and Town Planners in the eight towns are urged to have property owners and their representatives first meet and discuss each project with staff of the Gateway Commission to determine if compliance with the mission can be achieved with that given project. If improvements to the plan can be made, staff offers suggestions so that a property owner can achieve their development goals while meeting the greater need for preserving the beauty of the river valley. Due to this coordination and cooperation, Gateway has a high success rate in guiding hillside development so as to be as visually unobtrusive as possible.

Especially important to Gateway's protective mission is the retention of the tree cover that so defines our river hillsides. Staff will often meet with representatives of owners at a site to specifically discuss proposed structure locations, colors and forms, and also to discuss the retention of mature trees and other site vegetation. Owners are reminded that the preferred option for mature trees is for the property owner to "limb up" the lower third of the branches and limbs in order to afford the view of the river that the owner's seek, while still retaining the trees that visually buff the development from the river.

The relationship between staff of the Gateway Commission and the land use staff in each town hall and the engineers and architects who ply their trade in the lower Connecticut River valley is key to the coordination necessary to protect the river valley from development that would have a detrimental visual impact on the "*natural and traditional riverway scene*".

The Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Fund

In 1982, the Gateway Commission was the beneficiary of a one million dollar out-of-court settlement of a dispute about power lines crossing the river. Some \$300,000 of these funds were immediately committed to help the Nature Conservancy acquire a unique tract of 300 acres adjacent to Gillette Castle State Park. The Gateway Commission has used the remainder of these funds to establish a Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Fund and leveraging that fund to finance protection of other scenically important sites.

State Funding

Although originally providing financial support to the Gateway Commission, since about 1987, the State of Connecticut ended that support leaving Gateway to support itself with the Connecticut River Conservation Fund, which it has done. Although the State doesn't provide funding for Gateway initiatives any longer, the Commission continues to provide the assurance to the people of Connecticut, area residents and all of those who visit the lower Connecticut River valley that its beauty is being safeguarded for future generations to enjoy.