



Legislation Text

File #: 22-879, Version: 1

AGENDA ITEM CORRESPONDENCE

Subject:

MOTION to issue a letter, as contained in the draft dated December 6, 2022, to Groton Utilities Commission and Groton Town Council, to endorse and encourage public access to the Groton Reservoir to continue the development of the 14-mile Tri-Town Trail as defined on Master Plan, to traverse through the Groton Reservoir for passive recreation. the Groton Reservoir, to provide public access for passive recreation.

Background Information:

The Tri-Town Trail Committee, comprised of members from Groton, Ledyard and Preston, began work on a Tri-Town Trail initiative in 2008. The vision was to connect municipalities, economic centers, and residential areas for the public to enjoy the beauty of the natural resources in southeastern Connecticut through passive recreation, such as hiking and bicycling.

The 14-mile Master Plan developed with a Consultant was designed to go from Bluff Point to Preston Plains Park and clearly defined the recreation trail traversing through the Groton Reservoir.

During the past fourteen years, despite many appeals, the Groton Utilities Commission has denied permission for the recreational trail to pass thru the reservoir property based on concerns regarding the safety of the of the public water supply. Although the Groton City Council, who owned Groton Utilities, received a presentation regarding the Tri-Town Trail; there was no interest to open a dialogue, noting that Groton's leaders refused to discuss the matter at that time.

In recent years there has been a change of members on the Groton Utilities Commission. Some members, including Groton City Mayor Hendricks, attended the Ribbon Cutting for the opening of the Tri-Town Trail in at the Trail Head in Preston, and they have since made positive comments regarding the recreational trail. In addition, the Groton Utilities Commission recently hired a Consultant who would be providing a Report that described what other reservoirs do about recreational trails.

Data has shown that many reservoirs in Connecticut and across the country allow for public access and have recreational trails. As an example, the Hartford Reservoir, the New Haven Reservoir and the Mansfield Reservoir have recreational trails as well as picnic areas. The public enjoys visiting reservoir properties in their communities, and you will find UConn College Students using the Mansfield Reservoir all the time. Some reservoirs also allow fishing and boating.

The Tri-Town Trail Association met with the person who has been conducting water tests for the State of Connecticut. During their meeting the person reported that during the 20-years she has been conducting water tests that she has never found the water to be contaminated by the recreational use of reservoir properties. It should be noted that the reservoirs all have filtration systems, etc.

In 2012 the Ledyard Town Council sent a letter to Groton City Mayor Galbraith to support public access and the construction of a recreational trail through the Groton Reservoir property. Conservation Commission Member Dave Holdridge attended the Land Use/Planning/Public Works Committee's December 5, 2022 meeting. He noted that based on the progress of the construction of the Tri-Town Trail and changes in the Groton Utilities Commission that it may be beneficial for Ledyard to restate their position to support and encourage public access to the Groton Reservoir and allow the Tri-Town Trail to pass through the reservoir property.

Please see draft letter and Summarized List of Ledyard's points of view for the Groton Utilities Commission to consider.

Meeting Action Detail:

Town Council Meeting 12/14/2022:

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Moved: Paul Seconded: Rodriguez

Action: Approved and so declared

Minute Note:

Moved by Councilor Paul, seconded by Councilor Rodriguez

Discussion: Councilor Paul stated he supported public access and recreational trails thru the Groton Reservoir. He noted as Mr. Holdridge mentioned during his comments earlier this evening the Town Council and other Ledyard Officials issued a letter of support in 2012. He stated the Tri-Town Trail imitative began in 2008 to create a passive recreational trail that would run from Bluff Point to Preston Plains Park. He stated as Mr. Holdridge explained there has been some turnover in both staff and commission members in Groton, and that there may be a renewed effort to reconsider allowing recreational trails thru the Groton Reservoir.

Councilor Saums stated allowing passive recreation on reservoir property actually protected the water shed and protects the land because the people who use these types of resources will pick- up liter if they see it.

Chairman Dombrowski also noted that if people see a problem on reservoir properties that they would report it.

Councilor Paul stated as a former member of the Conservation Commission that they encourage people to walk the many recreational trails that were available. He stated the myth of the water becoming contaminated because of the recreational activity was just a myth. He stated having people access the property would help protect it.

8 - 0 Approved and so declared

Action: Approved and so declared

Land Use/Planning/Public Works Committee Meeting 12/5/2022:

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Moved: Rodriguez Seconded: Marshall

Action: Recommend to Approve

Minute Note:

Moved by Councilor Rodriguez, seconded by Councilor Marshall

Discussion: The LUPPW Committee noted Mr. Holdridge's comments earlier this evening (III Public Comments) and agreed to add this Motion to the Agenda this evening to issue a letter of support for the Groton Utilities Commission to allow public access to the reservoir property for the construction of the Tri-Town Trail.

Chairman Dombrowski noted the Groton Utilities Commission Minutes included the following:

- **October 19, 2022 Meeting Minutes:**

Tri Town Trails Association

Director Gaudet stated a group attended a meeting with Weston and Sampson and Chairperson Hedrick to review the extensive draft report that included regulatory requirements of GU owned land, survey respondents and considerations Groton Utilities needs to make. Scott Bighinatti is gathering additional information from the Groton Utilities team and will present to the Groton Utilities Commission at a meeting in the near future. The Commission would prefer to receive the final report prior to the present

- **November 16, 2022 Meeting Minutes:**

“Tri Town Trails Association:

Director Gaudet reported that the draft report is being completed by Scott Bighinatti, CFM of Weston & Sampson. Mr. Bighinatti is waiting for final comments from Tri Town Trails. It is expected that the Commission will receive the report at least two weeks prior to Mr. Bighinatti's Power Point Presentation that will be given in the December meeting. Chairperson Hedrick stressed that there would be no action regarding this in December.

Chairperson Hedrick asked if the Commissioners had set up a tour of the Watershed that was offered by the Utility. He said he and Commissioner Godley attended a recent tour. Commissioner Godley said the staff was extremely knowledgeable and the experience will help the Commission to make an informed decision. Commissioner Zuliani confirmed that he has replied that he will be attending on Friday”

Chairman Dombrowski stated based on the Groton Utilities Commission Minutes that the timing for Ledyard to provide a letter of support to allow public access to the Reservoir for passive recreational trails was crucial. He also noted the popularity of the Tri-Town Trail, noting that he always sees people using the sections of the Trail that have been completed.

Councilor Paul stated the Tri-Town Trail Association had a lot of momentum and he agreed with Chairman Dombrowski and Mr. Holdridge that the timing to provide a Letter of Support was crucial at this time. He also commented on the importance to access the reservoir for the completion of the construction of the 14-mile Trail as designed, from Bluff Point to the Preston Plains Park.

The LUPPW Committee noted that the *Letter of Support* should also include a *List of Points for Consideration*, as Mr. Holdridge discussed, to address the benefits of public access to the reservoir and previous comments and concerns regarding public access to the reservoir.

**Summary of Ledyard's Points of View for
Groton Utilities Consideration**

Trails bring benefits to communities:

- ✓ Several studies across the country show that established trail systems generate millions of dollars in economic activity.
- ✓ Trails encourage a healthier quality of life, safer pedestrian and bicycle movement, appreciation of the natural environment, and higher property values.
- ✓ According to real estate publications, "*Trails consistently remain the number one community amenity sought by prospective homeowners.*"

Trails will provide benefits for Groton Utilities:

- ✓ Trail access would be a public relations bonanza for Groton Utilities. Other water companies in Connecticut have cited dozens of benefits that they derive from a positive relationship with their neighbors and with the municipalities.
- ✓ Through interpretive signage and trail brochures the public will be educated on healthy watersheds and the filtration process.

✓

The larger presence of law-abiding citizens on reservoir properties has shown to reduce vandalism and other mischief.

- ✓ Grants are available from the State of Connecticut to buy open space and watershed lands.
- ✓ Ledyard has a growing Open Space purchase fund. If public access could be assured, there would be opportunities for Groton Utilities to coordinate with government and conservation groups to purchase additional watershed lands.

Arguments against trails on reservoir properties have little basis:

- ✓ Trails are not a real threat to clean water. In looking closely at the water testing that has been done over the past 20 years at other reservoirs in Connecticut, the findings have shown that there has never been a connection between recreational activity and contaminated water.
- ✓ Groton Utilities would have almost no liability exposure from personal injuries. In fact, Connecticut has a very strong statute protecting water companies from liability unless the company commits willful or wanton acts.
- ✓ Litter removal and trail obstructions are easily solvable issues. Several civic groups have already come forward to help local trail groups with litter removal and trail maintenance.
There will be no shortage of volunteers for these tasks.
- ✓ Other water companies report that there has been no significant increase in costs resulting from new trails. In fact, trail grants and fund-raising activities often help to alleviate costs that had previously been the sole responsibility of the water companies.

VOTE: 3 - 0 Approved and so declared.

Action: Recommend to Approve