March 12, 2007

House Speaker William J. Murphy
Office of the House Speaker
Rhode Island State House, Room 323
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Sale of MHRH Land in Charlestown in FY08 Budget

Dear Speaker Murphy,

We ask you to oppose the sale of the state-owned land in Charlestown (known as “Camp Pastore”) as proposed in Governor Carcieri’s FY 2008 budget and to return that property to its original use as a part of Burlingame State Park.

Camp Pastore comprises fifty, predominantly wooded acres on Watchaug Pond in Charlestown, adjacent to Burlingame State Park. The land that is now Camp Pastore was purchased through condemnation in 1934 by the Metropolitan Parks Commission (predecessor to the Department of Environmental Management (DEM)) for inclusion in Burlingame State Park. The property was leased to Department of Mental Health, Retardation & Hospitals (MHRH) for recreation and subsequently transferred to MHRH upon their request in 1986.

Sale of this land is poor public policy and would be detrimental to the environment. Not only would the sale and development of this land permanently alter a unique public asset – Watchaug Pond – it would also violate, contradict or be incompatible with existing Rhode Island law or policy in at least five different ways.

First, this land is wholly located within a Rhode Island Natural Heritage site. Natural Heritage sites contain “Rhode Island’s rarest and most vulnerable natural features.” Watchaug Pond is a globally-rare New England Coastal Plain Pond in great condition. Coastal Plain Ponds have a unique hydrology resulting in shorelines lined with rare species found nowhere else on earth. It is state policy to protect these lands from development.

Second, the sale of this land would be inconsistent with Rhode Island state law 42-17.9. One of the express purposes of the “Rhode Island Preservation and Open Space Act,” which was passed just last year, was to require that the conveyance of interests in state properties with open space values be consistent with the State Guide Plan and local comprehensive plans. The sale and development of the Camp Pastore property would be inconsistent with the State Guide Plan and the Comprehensive Plan of the Town of Charlestown.
Third, the Rhode Island Preservation and Open Space Act also requires that, effective July 20, 2006, any sale of state-owned property be subject to standards and guidelines that are designed to protect the public’s interest in open space and ensure that sales of state-owned lands do not result in an unnecessary loss of the state’s open space values. The Act further requires any agency proposing to sell a property that contains “open space values” to submit to the State Properties Committee an evaluation of the effect of the proposed action on the state’s interest in open space values. While the rules and regulations to implement the Rhode Island Preservation and Open Space Act have yet to be finalized, the sale of the Camp Pastore property is clearly not compatible with the intent and requirements of this statute.

Fourth, for the past several decades, Rhode Island has implemented a successful and popular program to acquire land to expand our system of state parks and management areas. A logical priority has been acquiring ecologically valuable properties that abut our state’s existing parks and management areas, and Rhode Island voters have consistently and overwhelmingly approved open space bonds for that very purpose. The sale of this land which was originally acquired through condemnation for a State Park would clearly conflict with Rhode Island’s investment in Burlingame and be incompatible with the goal of acquiring and protecting ecologically valuable lands for parks and management areas.

Fifth, The Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have also invested in the purchase and management of additional conservation lands surrounding Watchaug Pond in an effort to build upon the state’s investment in this Natural Heritage site. Not only would the sale of Camp Pastore threaten the state of Rhode Island’s investment in this area, but it also would threaten the investments of partner agencies and organizations who have worked closely with the state to conserve this incredible natural resource.

In conclusion, it simply is not good sense, nor good public policy, to sell a unique state-owned open space land like Camp Pastore. We urge you to publicly oppose the sale of Camp Pastore and to request that the land be transferred from MHRH back to DEM so it can be returned to Burlingame State Park.

Sincerely,

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The Nature Conservancy RI Land Trust Council

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