

Hands Off Preservation, Farm Fund

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As Gov. M. [Jodi Rell](#) and the General Assembly scramble to cut costs and find revenue to address the state budget deficit, they have repeatedly eyed a small but highly effective dedicated fund known as the Community Investment Account, or [CIA](#).

It is a low-hanging fruit, no doubt, but one that shouldn't be touched. A raid on this program will cripple the state's smart growth effort. It will permanently eliminate services and programs that the state would never otherwise pay for and which municipalities can hardly manage alone.

Established in 2005, the Community Investment Act, which created the fund, is a nationally recognized program that dedicates most of a \$30 deed recording fee toward state programs for land protection, farm viability, historic preservation and affordable housing. Four dollars of each fee remains with the town and the remainder is used for these four priorities; public willingness to accept this fee was based on the promise that the money would be permanently used for these purposes.

Though the account has shrunk with the real estate market, to a projected \$14 million this year, it still provides the only source of funding for planning grants to restore mills and historic properties, technical assistance to towns to develop affordable housing, pre-development loans for nonprofit developers of affordable housing, agriculture business promotion, municipal planning grants for land preservation, and rehabilitation of urban greens and community gardens. The funds have also leveraged unexpected levels of federal and private funds toward the same priorities.

The availability of Community Investment Account funds gives state agencies uncharacteristic flexibility and reliability. Unlike highly erratic state bonding commitments, CIA revenues are distributed each quarter, creating much-needed predictability for time-sensitive land transactions, construction projects and planning. In just three years, more than \$33 million in CIA-funded projects and grants have been awarded in 130 municipalities. (To see full list, go to www.cttrust.org)

In the state Department of Agriculture, the Community Investment Account pays for a mix of farmland preservation and farm business programs. Lebanon, Guilford, Milford and Thompson have used these grants to help plan for farmland preservation. Litchfield, Branford, [Waterbury](#), Stonington and Coventry have used the grants to help promote farmers markets and grow their local agriculture industry.

So far, the Community Investment Account has also paid for the purchase of development rights on eight farms (1,022 acres). Farmers and farmland preservation supporters agree the availability of CIA funds has given new credibility to the state's farmland preservation program by adding much-needed staff and expediting the agency's ability to obtain certified appraisals and land surveys.

In these challenging economic times, leaders at every level must make difficult budgetary decisions. However, it would be immensely short-sighted to raid the Community Investment Account. Much of the unspent CIA funds are obligated already for land deals that have not yet closed or grants that have not yet concluded.

We have a limited amount of time and resources to invest in maintaining the unique character of our state. Let's not sacrifice one of the few visionary programs that pays for itself and actually gets the job done.

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