

## Wallingford 25th to join state's CMDA

Development agency could help makes strides in downtown area

By Christian Metzger  
STAFF WRITER

WALLINGFORD — Wallingford is the 25th town to become a member of the growing Connecticut Municipal Development Authority.

Partnership with CMDA will allow the town access to resources and funding for development and housing projects near the former train station, officials say.

"Common sense does say that if you want to develop a transit area, you need places for people to live, that's the whole idea, and then build out the commercial footprint to set up a mini community in that area," Town Council member Vincent Testa Jr. said before a Sept. 9 vote to join the CMDA. "So I think the principles of this are very nice."

Wallingford has made strides to improve and develop its downtown, having passed a revision to zoning regulations earlier this year to encourage affordable development. The town has also put out proposal requests for the old train station, now that the adult education center has relocated, but have yet to receive interested developers.

Established by the General Assembly in 2019 to support towns with resources and ad-

*CMDA continues on A4*

## State officials offer warning as wildfire season nears

By Josh LaBella  
STAFF WRITER

Officials are warning Connecticut residents and visitors to exercise caution as the state approaches the fall wildfire season.

The state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection said in a news release that the typical fall wildfire season in the state runs from October through the first widespread snowfall. They said the dry weather and windy conditions during that period, combined with fallen leaves and increased sunlight reaching the forest floor, can elevate the likelihood of a wildfire.

"Almost all wildfires are caused by humans and are therefore preventable," DEEP officials wrote. "Maintaining awareness of fire danger and observing appropriate precautions are things that everyone can do to minimize the likelihood of starting a dangerous wildfire."

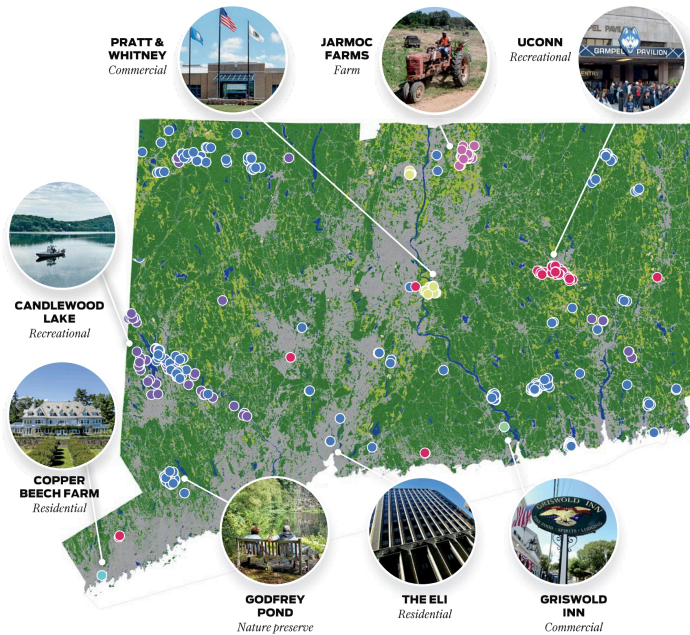
*Wildfire continues on A4*

# WHO OWNS CONNECTICUT?

These 8 properties begin to tell the story

The map below shows the different types of land in the state of Connecticut.

● Vegetated land cover ● Crops and pasture ● Barren land ● Developed land ● Open water



By Alex Putterman  
STAFF WRITER

For such a small place, Connecticut can be awfully hard to pin down.

It's where crops grow on sprawling farms just up the road from suburban strip malls and urban asphalt. Where you might go skiing in the winter and hit the beach in the summer without driving more than an hour in either direction. It's

home to both the Appalachian Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean. To some of the oldest structures in the country and plenty of gleaming new ones.

Our state bears the influence of indigenous peoples who have lived here for 12,000 years — including the name "Connecticut," an anglicized version of a Mohegan-Pequot word meaning "long tidal river." It features vestiges of the colonial

*Owners continues on A8*

**Largest landowners in Conn.**

- UConn
- Pratt & Whitney\*
- Jarmoc farms
- Griswold Inn
- CT Properties LLC
- Connecticut light power company
- Copper Beech Farms owned by LCT Range LLC
- Nature Conservancy of CT

\* Locations are everything (its parent company Raytheon Tech owns)

Map: Victoria Stavish and Bryan Haefele / Hearst Connecticut Media

## Winter flounder population floundering



University of Connecticut professor Eric Schultz looks at a flatfish sample collected more than 60 years ago as he oversees research on why they have been disappearing recently in Long Island Sound on Sept. 12 in Storrs.

Long Island Sound's bounty plunges from 47,000 to 292

By Austin Mirmina  
STAFF WRITER

As a young fisherman in the 1980s, TJ Karbowski would cast his line into Long Island Sound and, more often than not, a winter flounder came back wriggling on his hook.

"I used to catch them all the time," said Karbowski, who owns Rock and Roll Charters, a Clinton-based fishing charter.

"It went from me being a 10-year-old kid fishing off the dock catching winter flounder like no big deal to all of a sudden there's none."

Once abundant in the Sound, winter flounder — along with other flatfish — have all but disappeared as they face greater competition for food from invasive and fast-spreading species such as the black sea bass, according to scientists.

At the University of Connecticut, researchers are studying whether the flatfish's demise can indeed be traced to the proliferation of black sea bass and other bottom-feeders that have choked the Sound's food supply. To test the idea, they're applying a cutting-edge technique

to the eye lenses of flatfish that have been preserved since the 1950s. The results, they say, could help shape how commercial fisheries and regulators manage the capture of flatfish in the future.

Long Island Sound was once teeming with winter flounder. But over the past 30 years, their populations have dropped dramatically and "remained stubbornly scarce," said Eric Schultz, a UConn professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology who's leading the research effort. He cited overfishing and warming waters caused by climate change as possible factors for the winter flounder's decline.

*Flounder continues on A4*

Advice/puzzles.....D7  
Business.....B10-11  
Classified.....B12

Comics.....Inside  
Obituaries.....A16  
Opinion.....A20-21

Public notices.....B12  
Sports.....B1-8  
Television.....D6



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Weather: Mostly sunny and  
delightful. High: 70. Low: 50.  
Page A22

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## CMDA

From page A1

vice on development and regional transit zones, the CMDA secured funding and became active last year. Currently, the authority has a starting fund of \$30 million.

"This year, 2025, we've been really focused on achieving our mission, which is to provide a suite of tools to help our member municipalities achieve their development objectives in their downtowns or the areas around their train stations," CMDA Executive Director David Kooris said.

"We can support anything within our target geography that we identify that falls under the heading of development or redevelopment, so it's an incredible flexible funding source."

## A question of local control

Not all members of the council were open to the partnership. While partner towns are given the freedom to turn down the recommendations made by the CMDA, funding for projects will only be granted if the town accepts the group's adjustments made to zoning regulations.

Because of this, some members of the council thought that partnering with CMDA would cede the town's autonomy over zoning regulations to state authority.

"It's control of local zoning, essentially by the governor, because he has two-thirds of the appointees to this group that are controlling the purse strings," said Council member Craig Fishbein, who also serves as a Republican state representative

from the 90th District.

Because the stipulations of the contract allow all coordination for potential projects to go through the mayor's office, without necessarily receiving approval from the council, Fishbein voiced his concern that the council would be losing its authority over approval. He also took issue with the lack direct means to opt out of the CMDA once joined.

"So the state statute changes and says that all member municipalities that opt into this program have to change their zoning. What control do we have to over that happening? We don't. As a legislative body, we have no control at all. We are selling our town to the state, and I'm not comfortable with that."

Kooris said CMDA has no authority over the communities that are a part of the



Ned Gerrard/Hearst Connecticut Media

The former train station in downtown Wallingford.

group, that the authority is designed only to give recommendations, which the towns can choose either to accept or deny freely. Additionally, the purview of the CMDA doesn't extend beyond half a mile outside of active train stations or downtown areas, limiting the scope of what they could rec-

ommend, and where.

"We don't usurp control, we can't mandate any changes, we can't overrule zoning. If we have recommendations, that becomes the option of your zoning commission whether or not they take them," Kooris said.

Fishbein attempted to pass an amendment to revise

the conditions of the contract to give the town the ability to opt out, but it failed to pass.

Jim Seichter, chairman of the Planning and Zoning Commission, spoke at the meeting and voiced support of the partnership.

"To me, I look at it as an opportunity to have someone look under the hood, look at what our zoning happens to be within half-mile of our train station. We all know we've had our incentive housing zone on the books for years and we've had really no one taking advantage of that," Seichter said.

"From my perspective, at this point in time, I don't really have any concern, as a citizen of this town, that we'd be in jeopardy of having the state dictate to us."

All councilors, with the exception of Fishbein, voted in favor to approve the partnership with the CMDA.

## FLOUNDER

From page A1

In 1990, nearly 47,390 winter flounder were caught and studied as part of the Long Island Trawl Survey, which measures the health and abundance of fish in the Sound. By 2023, that number had fallen to just 292, according to the survey.

The winter flounder that remain in the Sound are smaller and thinner, suggesting they aren't finding enough food, Schultz said. Other flatfish included in the UConn study, such as windowpane, smallmouth and fourspot flounder, also have seen notable declines, while summer flounder, also called fluke, have shown "warning signs" of an impending drop in abundance, he added.

When Karbowski started Rock and Roll Charters in 2003, one fishing trip could yield 40 fluke, although not all were keepers, he said. But this year, from May through mid-September, the more than 200 trips his charter took produced only 10 fluke, three of them keepers.

Meanwhile, black sea bass have exploded in numbers, from a count of 27 in 1990 to 2,174 in 2023, the trawl survey notes. Other fish, such as scup and dusky smooth-hound, have followed similar trends.

The black sea bass are important for commercial and recreational fisheries, so their rapid growth isn't entirely a bad thing, according to the Long Island Sound Survey. But the increase does pose "negative cascading effects" on the food web by introducing greater demand, the survey says. That has been detrimental for the flatfish, which are forced to compete with the more aggressive transplants for worms, crabs, snails and other sources of food.

"Black sea bass are bullies and they displaced the fluke," Karbowski said. "They are destroying our entire ecosystem."

The UConn researchers are comparing the diets of flatfish with those of black sea bass and other growing species. If their diets are similar, it "suggests that flatfish may be losing out in competition," Schultz said.

Researchers will analyze the stomach contents of recently caught flatfish and other species to see if there's any overlap in what they're eating. To look farther back, they'll apply an elaborate technique to preserved specimens of flatfish being stored at UConn's Biodiversity Research Collections. One flatfish sample dates back to 1959.

The method involves extracting eye lenses from preserved fish. The marble-shaped lenses grow in layers, like an onion. By measuring the biomarkers, or molecules, in those layers, scientists can piece together the fish's diet at different stages of life.

"Life was good for flatfish in the '50s and '60s, before the black sea bass became very abundant."



Photos by Jim Michaud/Hearst Connecticut Media

Research assistant Katherine Helmer uses a microscope to examine samples from flatfish at the University of Connecticut in Storrs on Friday, Sept. 12.



Professor Schultz takes out at a flatfish sample collected more than 60 years ago within his research work on Sept. 12.

Schultz said. "Presumably there was a lot of food around for those flatfish. We may be able to see that in the eye lenses of these fish."

Besides Schultz, the research team consists of a mix of faculty members, graduate students, a lab assistant and a researcher at the Universidad Andres Bello in Chile. The work is being carried out at research labs in UConn's Storrs and Avery Point campuses.

Katherine Helmer, who works in Schultz's lab, studies fish scales to see how quickly the fish grew. The scales, she said, form rings like those in a tree, with the distance between the rings showing how well the fish was able to find food.

Schultz said his team is in the process of collecting fish samples, in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. The research project, which is being funded by a grant from the Long Island Sound Study, is expected to take up to two years, possibly longer, according to



University of Connecticut professor Eric Schultz takes out a flatfish sample collected more than 60 years ago. Schultz oversees research on why flatfish have been disappearing recently in Long Island Sound.

Schultz.

The findings could affect how flatfish are managed, including how many of them anglers are allowed to keep, Schultz said, though he stressed that regulatory changes weren't guaran-

teed.

Anglers can keep only two winter flounder and three fluke per day, compared with five black sea bass. DEEP's 2025 regulations state.

For Karbowski, the col-

lapse of flatfish in the Sound has been frustrating but not devastating to his business. His customers still prize striped bass, which have been plentiful.

"That's what's holding us together," he said.

## WILDFIRE

From page A1

Officials said there were 605 fires last fall that burned more than 500 acres and destroyed eight structures, disrupting communities around the state.

One such fire, which happened in Berlin and Meriden, required a massive response from authorities to put out and resulted in the death of Robert Sharkevich Sr., a firefighter from Wethersfield. That fire was caused by a campfire that was not put out properly.

Officials noted that last year Gov. Ned Lamont declared a state of emergency, issued a statewide burn ban and activated the Northeast Forest Fire Protection Compact. The latter decision brought in support from other states and the National Guard.

"Hundreds of firefighters and personnel from municipal fire departments, state and federal agencies, and Compact partners dedicated thousands of hours to wildfire response," DEEP officials wrote.

Officials said eight other firefighters were injured during the season.

"The statewide emergency last fall was a stark reminder of the dangers wildfires pose in Connecticut," DEEP Commissioner Katie Dykes said. "Last year our firefighting capabilities were stretched to the limit, requiring assistance from other states, and Canada. We all share responsibility for preventing wildfires, and in doing so, we help keep our first responders and our neighbors safe."

With that, Dykes asked people to be extra vigilant during the upcoming wildfire season. She said said everyone should stay informed about the daily fire danger level and local open burning laws, as well as properly attending to outdoor fires at home or when out camping.

Dykes said people should also carefully dispose of home heating ash and smoking materials, and exercise caution with machinery and equipment that could spark near dry grass and leaves.

Officials said Connecticut's fire risk is increasing as climate change drives more extreme weather patterns. They said those patterns can include drier conditions, hotter temperatures, and stronger winds — all of which are risk factors for wildfire.

"If you spot a wildfire, remain calm, go to the nearest telephone, and dial 911 to report the fire as quickly as possible to your local fire department," they said.

"Tell the emergency dispatcher when and where you saw the fire. If you see anything suspicious at or near the scene of the fire, take note and relay that to the dispatcher as well. Stay on the telephone until the dispatcher tells you to hang up."