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TO: APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

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NURTURING OUR COMMUNITY INVESTMENTS

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By Terry Jones

Kudos to the *Connecticut Post* for its Jan. 9 editorial supporting the good work of the Community Investment Act by citing recent agriculture viability grants to local projects in Stratford, Bridgeport and Westport. It's a message every legislator and Gov. M. Jodi Rell needs to hear, particularly since proposals have been put forward to divert future Community Investment Act revenue to the state's general fund.

The recently announced grants from the state Department of Agriculture are but a small part of the good works of this legislation. The program was created in 2005 after lengthy collaboration between citizens and legislators seeking to provide a modest but dependable stream of revenue to enable Connecticut communities to jump start quality of life and environment enhancing projects often overlooked or underfunded.

Originally proposed for farmland preservation, groups such as Connecticut's Working Lands Alliance took the bold position that the funding should be spread in a wider circle to equally embrace agriculture, historic preservation, open space/environment and affordable housing investments. In addition, it was established that a portion of the document recording fee that funds the program remain in each town for local capital improvement projects.

The Community Investment Act has become Connecticut's "little engine that could." In its first four years, more than 800 projects in 130 towns have benefited from a total investment of almost $40 million. A majority of these state grants leveraged matching funding from the private sector, municipalities, nonprofits and federal sources. CIA funds have also paid for vital staffing to help manage the array of new programs and to provide technical assistance.

Rural and urban areas alike have benefited. The CIA has protected farmland and open space, restored urban gardens, revived museums and historic structures, and brought farmers markets and affordable housing to our downtowns. The spirit of partnerships working with "force of cooperation" that gave birth to the CIA has become its ongoing credo.

Connecticut is fortunate that in 2005 legislative leaders, including Senate President Don Williams of Brooklyn and House Speaker Jim Amann of Milford worked together to pass the CIA. Our beloved "Dean of the House," the late state Rep. Dick Belden, whose legislative philosophy was the gold standard of evaluating the prudency of every expenditure, was its staunch advocate. Governor Rell signed the bill in a ceremony amidst the apple orchards of Glastonbury, reminding us that Connecticut grown environmental and community investments are vital to a healthy future for our children.

We must now assert with passion the need to preserve the integrity of the CIA. Although tempting in the current budget crisis, it should not be ended and the dollars dumped into the general fund — even temporarily. That was the plan when the Connecticut lottery was diverted from dedication to the general fund. It never changed back. Dollars from the CIA would contribute less than a tiny fraction of 1 percent of the general fund, the widespread benefits of directly investing this money (often enhanced by matching funds) in our communities greatly outweigh any short-term gain to the fund.

History teaches us the risk is high that this community investment program would never be re-established.

In these stressful economic times, we must nurture opportunities to invest in the quality of life within our communities. More than ever, we need our green spaces, parks, places of history, affordable housing, farms and gardens. Healthy food and recreation are even more important to our physical, spiritual and mental health as the depressing drumbeat of negative economic statistics beat away daily.

Governor Rell and our Legislature should not tamper with the CIA. It pays its own way each and every year and leaves our children a legacy of better communities. Like our children, that is a treasure worth nurturing.

Terry Jones is a Shelton farmer who volunteers with Connecticut's Working Lands Alliance.