

Testimony of David Fink, Policy Director, Partnership for
Strong Communities, to Planning and Development
Committee, February 25, 2008

Sen. Coleman, Rep. Feltman, Honored members of the Committee,

My name is David Fink. I am the policy director for the Partnership for Strong Communities, a statewide housing policy organization that advocates for effective strategies to end homelessness, produce housing affordable for all of Connecticut's residents and develop healthy and strong neighborhoods.

As you know, The Partnership provides the staff support for the HOMEConnecticut campaign and the Connecticut Housing Program for Economic Growth, the responsible growth housing statute you wisely supported and passed last June.

I am here today to support the spirit and thrust – if not every individual provision – of SB 39, An Act Concerning Responsible Growth. Gov. Rell and you, as leaders of the General Assembly, deserve much credit for advancing policy that would help us grow responsibly. I am aware the governor's office, members of your committee and interested parties are working to revise the bill, so I will dwell on the bill's primary, positive direction.

As members of this committee, you know better than anyone that Connecticut MUST GROW. Census Bureau projections reported to the General Assembly in December by OPM make that abundantly clear: CT population through 2030 is projected to grow only 8.3% compared to the nation's 29%. OPM warned that our 65+ population will grow 70% while under-65 population will decline. Instead of the current 4.5 workers for every person 65 or older, we will have 2.6!! The conclusion

is obvious: we either increase young worker population – young professionals, young families – or we will not have skilled, educated labor, businesses will leave, jobs will disappear and our ability to raise sufficient tax revenues for state services and local aid will wither.

One of the key ingredients to avoiding this horrible fate is constructing housing that workers, young professionals and families can afford. And we need it. We have lost more 25-34-year-old population than any other state since 1990. We have seen the number of households burdened by housing costs – households earning 80% of median income or less that have to spend 30% or more of that income on housing – rise from 19% to 26% (MORE THAN A FOURTH!!) in just 2 years. 72% of the jobs we will create through 2014 will pay less than \$40,000, nowhere close to enough to purchase a house.

That is why the spirit of SB 39 is so vital to advance. The proposal for a Responsible Growth Cabinet is the linchpin. The prototype is the Interagency Working Group on Supportive Housing. Its commissioners are committed, they develop specific goals based on MOUs and their staffers get the work done. To grow, but to grow RESPONSIBLY – that is, to create housing opportunities and jobs in areas where infrastructure can handle density, near transit facilities, in town centers, without eating up open space – we have to replicate that cooperation. We must make sure our departments of economic and community development, environmental protection, transportation, public health, housing finance and the others TALK TO EACH OTHER.

We have set the stage for such cooperation with HOMEConnecticut. More than 20 municipalities are now seeking technical assistance grants to plan Incentive Housing Zones in just such responsible growth locations. I have met with more than 90 municipal leaders. They know they must create more housing options, they know they can best do so in areas where infrastructure already exists, and they are ready to work with you to create that housing and GROW RESPONSIBLY. It is our hope that, in addition to the incentive payments the statute calls for, Gov. Rell and the legislature will see fit to give such towns any additional help they need to get that housing built – whether it is infrastructure, remediation or TOD aid directly related to the housing creation, or grants for open space or farmland preservation that would work hand-in-hand with responsible growth planning and housing creation in areas with infrastructure.

Unfortunately, to date, such development often proceeds unwisely – or, more to the point, doesn't proceed at all – because departments

don't work together. With a Responsible Growth Cabinet, that could change. I would think commissioners of the caliber of Gina McCarthy and Joan McDonald could find a way, for example, to protect the environmental resource at issue, and still get the housing built.

Perhaps the preeminent example of why a Responsible Growth Cabinet isn't just a nice idea, but an ESSENTIAL ONE, is transportation-oriented development.

Given the demographic tsunami that will break disastrously over us if we don't attract and retain young workers, we must make sure every TOD grant that DOT gives out ensures not just a housing component, but one that includes units affordable to young workers and families. We have learned the hard way -- in Metro Washington, New Jersey and other locales that have newly-created transit -- that wealthy people LOVE to live near the station. So even if housing isn't an afterthought -- that is, EVEN IF it is included in a TOD development -- our state will be much better served if the DECD commissioner is sitting at the Responsible Growth Cabinet table to remind the DOT commissioner, should he or she forget, that not a dime of DOT grant money should go out the door without affordable, MIXED-INCOME, housing as part of the development.

I will conclude with a quick story. Last Friday, WNPR did an incredible show about Connecticut's loss of young worker population. One of the guests announced that he was Connecticut's enemy -- that he was in competition with Connecticut. Who was he? He was the development director for Raleigh, N.C. He sounded like a very nice guy. But he said that the supply of housing allowed to be created in his city provided everything from luxury condos for \$200K to starter homes for \$150K. Nothing like that is available in Connecticut and it is one reason why North Carolina is gaining young workers and families. More to the point, the responsible growth advocates in Raleigh are already thinking ahead to a time, he said, when the supply of housing and land shrink. He said they are planning for higher density areas where affordable homes can be built so they can keep attracting young workers and families.

The point is, they know in North Carolina that they are competing with us for skilled workforce and young families. For too long, it wasn't apparent that the leaders of Connecticut even realized we needed to compete. But this bill, creating a Responsible Growth Cabinet, would begin to get the right team on the field not only to compete but to win.

It's a very good idea, and Gov. Rell and the General Assembly are to be congratulated for supporting it.