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Testimony of Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz to the Planning and Development Committee
March 2, 2009

Representative Sharkey, Senator Coleman, and members of the Planning and Development Committee: For the record, my name is Susan Bysiewicz, and I am Secretary of the State of Connecticut. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify in support of a number of bills that may set forth serious policy that could have a profound impact on the state of our economy, our quality of life, and the preservation of our state's assets. I would like to commend the Smart Growth Working Group for its efforts to develop a comprehensive policy proposal in this area.

I grew up on a farm in Middletown, so this is an issue near and dear to my heart. Connecticut is losing open space and farmland at a faster rate than any other state in the U.S.A. We now have just 4,200 farms left in our state on 360,000 acres of land, just 11% of our overall land mass area. We are losing farmland at a rate of 10,000 acres a year. Our farms are being replaced with suburban sprawl, bringing more cars, air pollution, water pollution and yes, higher property tax revenues. This kind of growth is not sustainable over the long run. We must reverse this trend before Connecticut loses the unique features of its countryside that make us an attractive state and contribute to our high quality of life.

The term "Smart Growth" has become a phrase heard often our region of the country, which has seen tremendous economic expansion and decline,

leaving our communities at a cross-roads when it comes to the priorities of development. But it is long past time in Connecticut for smart growth to move from being merely a popular pair of words into a transformative and guiding set of principles that comprehensively govern how we grow and develop in every community in Connecticut.

This means organizing and planning communities around a vital center that encourages the healthy movement of people and results in strong cultural and economic institutions and ultimately, an enhanced quality of life that attracts vibrant businesses and innovative people to our state. In other words, we must build town and city centers not around the convenience of car and truck travel, but around walking, biking and public transportation. Our communities must feed the mind and the soul as well as put food on our family's plates.

These communities must be connected by a thorough, reliable, efficient, and affordable public transportation network. We must shift the focus of constructing new residential and commercial facilities away from how many new structures we can build to a set of more urgent and appropriate questions: how many acres of pristine, workable farmland can we save? How many enduring and vital industrial-era buildings and sites can be saved or re-used to create new industries and quality, affordable housing? How many formerly contaminated Brownfields can we clean up and convert into revenue generating residential, commercial or industrial facilities? How can the design of buildings, transportation systems, and the essential infrastructure that supports community development help to use less energy and water, reduce carbon emissions, create more jobs, and improve schools?

We must also move away from the industrial model in American society which focused with near exclusivity on the derivation of profits from the exploitation of natural and human resources. Often development decisions in communities focused on the short-term generation of public and private revenue with scant regard to the long-term environmental and economic damage that might cause. This is damage that later generations such as ours must now clean up. As we have seen by the devastating results to our economy and environment, smart growth is an essential component to sustainable economic development. It is also a vital and necessary element which is inseparable from our strategy to reduce the effects of global warming.

Yet, we must also acknowledge the reality that Connecticut's population continues to grow while the availability of our natural resources remains the same. One resource that is in great abundance in Connecticut is our ingenuity and the ability to craft new solutions to address our evolving challenges. That is why the time is now, in the midst of the worst economic crisis our state has seen since the great depression, to take the permanent steps necessary to make smart growth the binding blueprint for our community and economic development. We can and we must forge a way into the future that gives a shining example of leadership nationwide that will show conclusively that: 1)Economic development is not at odds with historic and farmland preservation, in fact they are shared goals; 2)Communities and our state can find greater success when short-term focus on the concentrated accumulation of wealth is replaced with responsible planning that makes the greatest improvements to the quality of life for the greatest amount of people.

We have begun as a state and a country to change the terms of the debate and the frameworks of our decision making when it comes to issues such as land use, zoning, infrastructure, community planning and economic development. The General Assembly took a bold step in 2005 by creating a fund through the Community Investment Act to preserve open space and farmland, and set aside funds for the development of affordable housing following the principles of smart growth. Passing the set of bills before you today will go a long way towards permanently integrating these principles into statewide, community, and regional planning efforts, and I urge lawmakers to vote yes. Thank you.

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