



Bill # 5058

Testimony of David Fink, Policy Director, Partnership for Strong Communities To The Housing Committee, February 2013

Rep. Butler, Sen. Bartolomeo, Rep. Miller, Sen. McKinney, Distinguished Members of the Housing Committee,

I am David Fink, policy director of The Partnership for Strong Communities, a statewide housing policy organization that promotes state-of-the-art solutions to end homelessness, create affordable housing and foster community development.

Thirty years ago, the NJ Supreme Court ruled in the landmark Mt. Laurel case that municipalities may not use their zoning power to exclude working class people from their towns. New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut and many other states responded with laws designed to correct exclusionary zoning. But despite the significant effectiveness of 8-30g in producing thousands of units for people in many towns across the state, the job is far from done.

In fact, here we are in 2013, with low- and moderate-income people confined to overburdened school districts and communities with fewer resources, having no choice – because of higher housing prices directly related to those exclusionary practices – to choose the towns and neighborhoods that work best for them and their children. According to DECD, 140 of our 169 cities and towns have little or, in some cases, no affordable housing.

Why not?

The decision-makers and residents believe it will increase crime, lower property values and increase school costs. They are wrong. Research by MIT, Rutgers, UMass, UConn and other esteemed institutions -- along with testimonials by police chiefs, mayors, assessors and other experts -- have proven that those adverse events don't result from affordable and mixed-income housing creation.

Property values don't fall, crime doesn't rise and most schools are seeing enrollments decline currently, or in the near future. The school-age population in Fairfield is a good example. Its enrollment has risen modestly in recent years because of a wave of growth 10-20 years ago. But it is clear that, in the last five years, elementary school enrollment has fallen and school-age population is projected to drop more than 20% between 2015 and 2025. And if a town's enrollment is rising, it's probably because those towns are building large homes. 1BR and 2BR multifamily units and 3BR starter homes bring VERY FEW SCHOOL CHILDREN. Large colonials bring many.

It's as if the residents of these exclusionary towns believe working class people are good enough to mow their lawns, plow their snow, rake their leaves, teach their children, care for their parents, nurse their sick, clean their streets, put out their fires, protect their communities -- but not live down the block, share their schools or go to church together. In fact, I had one first selectman -- whom I don't want to embarrass -- actually tell me the town's police and firefighters wouldn't feel comfortable living in that town. I asked whether those workers should be allowed to make that decision on their own.

As a legislature, you should reject that thinking.

For one thing, the housing is needed. Connecticut has the nation's 6th highest rental costs and 8th highest home values because of a lack of supply: we are 50th over the last decade in units built per capita, and what we've built is not what we need. 52% of all renters and 41% of all households spend more than 30% of their income on housing. That's bad for them, and terrible for our state's economy.

Secondly, why should only wealthy households have a wide choice of the schools, community services and neighborhoods that work best for their children? Why shouldn't working class families have those choices -- especially when research has shown time after time that low- and moderate- income kids who live in high resource school districts do better in school and better in life? Why should Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, Meriden and our other great cities shoulder the whole burden of closing our disgraceful first-in-the-nation achievement gap? Why should people who move into these exclusionary communities pull up the drawbridge so others can't get in?

We can't have two Connecticut's. We can't bottle up our working class residents in overburdened cities with fewer resources and expect all of them to thrive.

If I thought the 140 municipalities with little to no affordable housing would not simply plan, but actually build, more affordable or mixed-income units without prodding, I'd consider whether we could do without a statute like 8-30g. But the record doesn't lie. Very few of them have built any in the last two decades unless they were pushed by the strong, sure hand of 8-30g. If they don't want to see their zoning decisions overridden by 8-30g, if they don't want to feel the statute's pressure, there is an easy way to avoid both: first, thoughtfully, proactively plan and zone for construction of some affordable or mixed-income housing and then ENSURE THAT IT'S BUILT!!

Over the last decade (2002-'11), 3 towns achieved moratoria under the statute: Darien has gone from 87 to 185 affordable units, Berlin from 203 to 586 and Trumbull from 328 to 634. All have doubled their percentages of affordable units. As for Fairfield, they went from 570 to 569!! Towns can make progress, they can meet the moratorium provisions and they can make a place for the people who work in their communities, but who now have to leave at day's end when their work is done.

8-30g can work. It IS working for your constituents. And there is no rational, fair reason to weaken it.