Senator Steve Cassano
Representative Jason Rojas
Chairmen of the Planning and Development Committee
Distinguished Planning and Development Committee Members

I am honored and privileged to submit this written testimony in support of Bill HB-5724 an Act Prohibiting Municipal Employees from Serving on Certain Municipal Legislative Bodies.

By way of introduction my name is Robert Walsh and I am uniquely qualified to testify to this bill having served the city of Bridgeport as both a city employee and a member of its City Council; simultaneously for a very short period of time.

I was eminently qualified to serve as Finance Manager for a department within the Health Department having graduated with honors with a BS in Management and an honors student while a candidate for my MBA. I had previously worked as a Controller for two small businesses as well as holding various other accounting and finance positions in private industry.

And my eventual 15+ years on the City Council serve as a testament to the respect that I had garnered from my constituents.

I always recognized the potential conflict in attempting to serve two masters and had always maintained that my service to my constituents had a higher priority than my self. I can not speak to others and how they balance their priorities but I can tell you that anyone who says there is no conflict has already preconceived notions as to how they will act but dare not say them out loud.

It was during the tenure of Mayor Ganim that I was challenged on my priorities. During a meeting of the City Council I took Mayor Ganim to task in harsh fashion for his handling of the privatization of the workforce of the city's Water Pollution Control Authority. Within weeks I was no longer an employee of the city.

Of course I was not terminated for speaking out against the mayor. Another finance position within the city was eliminated and I as "bumped" in accordance with the LIUNA union contract. The contract language called for the administration, with the union's consent, to form a select bumping group. In this group the person whose position was eliminated was an officer of the union and I was least senior in the group.

The collective bargaining protections that some people believe adequately protect members of a union were woefully inadequate. Other protections such as classified versus unclassified civil service have been weakened in practice over the years and I was considered a member of the grants payroll and therefore exempt from civil service regulations.

As I said previously from the very beginning of the conflict I chose to place myself in, I was prepared to pay this price. The *only* satisfaction that I received from all of this was that first of all was the knowledge that I was correct. As the Ganim corruption investigation played out, the public would learn and a jury would confirm that the privatization contract was one of the more lucrative kickback schemes in the conspiracy. And secondly, when approached by agents from the FBI seeking my cooperation I was told that they could tell from my public comments about the mayor and his administration that I had no involvement in the matter whatsoever.

And so I submit to you this testimony to personally let you know that this threat is not only perceived but it is real. However, even if only perceived if my dismissal resulted in any reluctance of members of the council who are also city employees from speaking out against a corrupt administration or less onerous acts then it served its purpose multi-fold.

And I further submit to you that a manipulative Chief Elected Officer does not always need a stick to forge a majority vote but, with council members on the payroll, a carrot is a much easier tool of persuasion. Whether it is paid time off not charged to vacation in order to tend to council business, the use of the term "acting" versus permanent to circumvent Civil Service Regulations, shifting funding for certain positions in order to circumvent Hatch Act requirements, wage adjustments, promotions for non-tested positions, creating uniquely defined positions to hire and avoid testin, the list can go on for as long as ones creative imagination carries it.

And just as easily as a vote can be bought, an unscrupulous employee / council member can bargain or sell his vote.

An independent City Council plays a major role in the checks and balances of local government. Every effort should be made to ensure that manipulative individuals are not given a green light or even a cautionary yellow light in tilting these scales of balance.

The state already carves out certain local boards that city employees cannot serve on. They are barred from serving on Land Use Boards and Finance Committees. And yet in the city of Bridgeport where the council sets the budget and the mill rate, where the council approves all appointments to boards and commissions including land use boards, where the council sets the mayors pay through approval of other collective bargaining agreements, what sense does it make not to include these individuals in an already existing ban.

As a matter of fact, the voters in the city of Bridgeport in their infinite wisdom have previously approved charter language to ban employees from serving on the council but current state law prohibits the city from enforcing this.

So in a state like Connecticut or cities such as Bridgeport or Waterbury where corruption has a long and ugly history, why is there such hesitancy to close such a glaring loophole?

Give the voters the right to choose and give the cities that have already chosen wisely the ability to enforce.

I urge this committee to submit a favorable finding on this bill and to forward it to the General Assembly for its approval.

Respectfully yours,

Robert S Walsh
56 Redding Pl
Bridgeport CT
(203) 623-6215 Cell
bwalsh@tbtalk.com