Town of Fairfield

Office of the First Selectman
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Michael C. Tetreau
First Selectman

Sullivan Independence Hall
725 Old Post Road

February 5, 2015

Dear Members of the Connecticut State Legislative Housing Committee:

My name is Michael C. Tetreau and I am the First Selectman of the Town of Fairfield. While I am unable to attend tonight's hearing in person, I am writing in support of efforts to amend Section 8-30g of the Connecticut General Statutes.

Let me first say that I support the spirit of 8-30g and efforts to create affordable housing in my community and throughout the State. It is vitally important that we provide a full range of housing options, and that we have housing that is affordable to our young people, our working families and our senior populations. However, I have also seen the unintended consequences of this law, as some developers have used it to threaten towns and to try to subvert land use regulations, not so much out of a desire to create real affordable housing, but for financial gain.

Fairfield, like many cities and towns throughout our State, is a fairly mature, developed community. There are few remaining open tracts of land suitable for new housing development, and new housing production over the last decade has averaged less than 60 units per year. Is it realistic, therefore, to set a threshold of ten percent in order to achieve the affordable housing goals outlined in the statute? For Fairfield, and most communities throughout this State, that goal—as noble it may be—is totally unattainable. If a goal is not clearly defined, measurable *and attainable*, how effective is that goal?

In Fairfield, we have made strides in developing affordable housing, including most recently, enactment of inclusionary zoning in the vicinity of a new train station which allows increased residential densities of up to fifty bedrooms per acre, and requires that ten percent of all residential units be set aside to persons or families at or below eighty percent of the area median income. The Town has had to be creative and flexible. Often, this has required the Town to appropriate funds for this purpose, such as when the Town bonded $7 million to acquire a former military housing site which was later converted into 22 affordable home ownership units and 8 units of permanent supportive housing. Similarly, in 1988, the Town appropriated funds and authorized construction of ten units (later increased to twenty-four units) of affordable owner-built housing on Town-owned property. I make mention of this development, not because of its size, but to make a point that Fairfield has been engaged in this work for more than three decades. To be sure, there is still work to be done to meet the needs of our citizens.

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I support reasonable, common sense legislation to reform this law. Several of the proposed bills before you merit serious consideration. Given demographic trends and the need to provide affordable housing options for our aging population, I see no reason why affordable elderly housing units should be discounted as they are now. I have no objection to providing incentives or bonus points to encourage communities to develop non-age restricted rental housing, but affordable elderly units should be worth one housing unit equivalency point. I support efforts to require affordable units in set-aside developments to remain affordable in perpetuity, rather than allow these restrictions to sunset after forty years, as has been proposed previously. I do not believe that we should allow set aside developments in flood zones; that seems contrary to good planning principals and public policy.

I gave the example before of Fairfield's efforts to create affordable housing pre-1990 to illustrate yet another issue that I have with CGS 8-30g. Fairfield first adopted an Affordable Housing Plan in 1989. By 1990, Fairfield had already developed more than 200 units of affordable housing. We did so by converting former schools for congregate elderly housing, by working with area non-profit housing developers, and in the case of the owner-built housing referenced above, by appropriating town funds and acting as the developer ourselves. During this same time period, the Town converted a former Police station for use as a homeless shelter; Operation Hope continues to provide transitional housing in that town-owned building for homeless men, women and families. However, under current law, communities like Fairfield that made efforts to address the affordable needs of its residents do not receive any credit for doing so prior to 1990; that is wrong, and should be corrected. Simply put, communities should receive credit in the form of housing unit equivalency points for the affordable housing units that they have built regardless of when they were first constructed or deed restricted.

Lastly, I support efforts to encourage municipalities to develop regional solutions to these problems. As stated before, does it make sense to establish the same goal for each of the 169 towns, or would it make more sense to provide incentives for communities to work regionally to address this issue so that development is more focused on areas that have the infrastructure in place to support such development. Moreover, if the State really wanted to encourage communities to enact incentive housing zones as provided for in CGS 8-13, why not link those efforts to meaningful relief from unwanted set aside development applications pursuant to CGS 8-30g. That would seem to me a much more powerful incentive for communities to enact such measures than financial incentive payments that may or may not materialize given budgetary cosntraints.

Section 8-30g does have its place, but it is an imperfect and rather blunt instrument for achieving the goal of creating more affordable housing. I believe that enactment of common-sense reforms will enable communities to respond more effectively and ultimately create more affordable housing to meet the needs of its citizens.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Michael C. Tetreau
First Selectman