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**GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE
MARCH 14, 2016**

RE: S.J. 36: and H.B. 5619:

CHAIRMEN CASSANO AND JUTILA, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of **S.J. 36** and in opposition to **H.B. 5619**.

I am a land use attorney and former Groton Town Councilor and am very familiar with the land subject of **H.B. 5619, section 8**, being a portion of property owned by the State of Connecticut and known as the “Oral School Property”. The property abuts River Road on the Mystic River and should be considered for preservation as open space and for passive recreational purposes, not “economic development” Sec 8(b).

In 1987-8, on my initiative as a sitting Town Councilor, the good citizens of Groton voted, by referendum (Ordinance No. 195) “to commit the sum of eight million dollars for the purchase of land to be set aside for open space, conservation and recreational purposes”. It was revolutionary at that time and clearly indicated a strong support by Groton citizens for conservation and preservation of open space in the Town of Groton.

One of the most significant properties purchased by the town (the Mystic Community Center property for \$880,000), lies just to the north of the “Oral School” property and also abuts the river. That the state owned the sizable tract of land (the Oral School property) which was unlikely to be developed and was contiguous to the Community Center property was a consideration of the selection committee and Town Council in approving the purchase. To transfer the 68 acres of the Oral School property, by way of H.B. 5619, to the town without restricting the transfer to open space and conservation would be against the wishes of the residents of Groton as expressed in that referendum. As there is no requirement to determine the residents’ wishes on this transfer or for the future use of the property (as S.J. 36 would provide), the committee should oppose the transfer as proposed. Local hearings should be first held to ascertain the wishes of the residents of Groton. Once those wishes are heard, the transfer of the property could properly be considered.

The Committee should oppose **Section 8 of H.B. 5619** at this time or remove language allowing economic development on the property.

Favorably reporting **S.J. 36**, and its eventual passage would correct the lack of local public input for such sensitive land transfers.

There is local discussion that the property, if acquired by the town, would be to build high-end houses for the executives of General Dynamics. While that may not be true, the specific planned use of the property, if acquired by the town should first be fully discussed by interested Groton residents, as well as our neighbors in Stonington, which lies just across the river, prior to any transfer. With those considerations, it may be appropriate for any transfer to restrict the uses for open space, conservation preservation or passive recreational purposes.

The residents of both sides of the river have a long history of protecting the quality of the river, and in its scenic value. River Road, while I was a Town Councilor, was one of the first (if not the first) to be designated a *scenic road* under the state statute in the 1980s . A major “high rise” hotel was proposed on the east side of the upper river a bit over a decade ago. The residents on both sides of the river successfully opposed it because it was simply too tall for the river scape. (I was the lead council for the citizen's group). Last year a zone change on the property between the Town owned “community center” open space and the State owned Oral School open space was granted to bring the zone lot size in compliance with the majority of the existing lots (from two acres to one acre). A successful argument made to the zoning commission was that the river was well protected by the public properties on the both ends of the changed zone. (I represented the land owner requesting the zone change.)

Transfer to, and potential development of the Oral School property by the Town of Groton, without full opportunity for input by those most affected should not be enabled by this committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to address these issues. I am happy to discuss these matters with any committee member at your convenience.

Sincerely Yours,
Richard D. Dixon, Esq.
March 14, 2016