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Via: Email Attachment

Personal Testimony of Harold Falber of 5 Oak Lane Weston, CT 06883

In strong opposition to proposed bills: SB 738, SB 457, SB 874

Dear Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to express my opinion and beliefs concerning SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874. I am a 33 year resident of Connecticut, and a 22 year resident of Weston, Connecticut. I serve Weston as an elected commissioner of Planning & Zoning currently working on the 2020 Plan for Conservation & Development. I am a member of the Democratic Party and the Weston DTC.

I am married to Pattie Falber, the principal of Weston Intermediate School, who started her career in public school education here in Weston as a teacher 25 years ago. Previous careers included being an equity actor trained in voice at Julliard, editor of Self Magazine, Director of Public Relations for Newbridge Networks, and Assistant Education Director for New Jersey Symphony Orchestra.

Here in Weston, Pattie was also Assistant Principal at Hurlbutt Elementary School, Weston Public Schools District Coordinator for Strategic Planning, and was Director of the Temple Israel Early Childhood Center Summer Program and head teacher of the four-year-old program, among other positions.

Additionally, Pattie holds her (093) Superintendent's Certification from the NEAG School of Education, UConn. She is also a trained facilitator for Strategic Planning certified by The Cambridge Group.

I write this testimony in deeply felt opposition to SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874. But without framing it in my most personal feelings about my community, my neighbors, my family, my roots, it will provide you little context as to why I am so opposed. And why I fear these proposed bills put the essence, the very core of the 5th ratified Colony of the United States, in danger of complete annihilation as generations have known it – a tightly sewn quilt of

unique towns and communities with their own identities, quirks, charms, history, yet bound under the umbrella of being one of the original 13 colonies that grew into our great country and the State of Connecticut.

Yes, I know our first two “towns” were Hartford and New Haven, but they were agricultural and port regions and as Connecticut matured, and our boundaries grew, unique smaller communities, fiercely independent, self-sufficient, and rugged were established and formed from the verdant land, and governed by the citizens within each town. To this day, Connecticut’s countryside is covered with the small town cemeteries where the founders, their families, and their off-spring were laid to rest, where they were born, raised, educated, and died.

I was born in The Bronx. April 14, 1946. Not your idea of a small town. But The Bronx of the 40s and 50s was made up of small communities. Communities still named. Mine was Wakefield. I lived there until I was four. Went to kindergarten at PS 16 a couple of blocks from my parent’s apartment. My Dad and his brothers owned a small hardware store up the street on White Plains Road. But my community was even smaller. One building, 660 East 242nd Street. Still there. It held six of my maternal families. They all lived there well into my 20s. My Dad’s brother lived right across the street in a big, to me, rambling house. The Bronx was different then.

Things changed. My Dad bought his own hardware store. In a little town up in Westchester called North Tarrytown. We lived in Tarrytown. There was no Tappan Zee Bridge. In fact, I watched the original bridge being built out my bedroom window, and our little small towns declared a holiday when it opened, my grandmother and I walked across it. North Tarrytown was already famous then. You know it by The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. Which is its current name as the powers to be thought Sleepy Hollow would raise the value of its real estate. I’m not sure how that worked out. And anyway I’m a traditionalist. I still refer to it as NT. I worked in my Dad’s store starting when I was 9, sweeping floors for my allowance. As I said, things were different then.

I’ll flash forward in time now as we need to get to Connecticut. Let me say I went away to school, a military academy, in a small town in upstate New York, not because I was bad, rather because I needed some toughening up due to bullying and what then I did not recognize as anti-Semitism. Small school. Small town. Cornwall-on-Hudson. I went to college in a small town. Oneonta. When I started working for real, it was in advertising, in a big town, on Madison Avenue. And as I transitioned to corporate life instead of advertising agencies, I saw a lot of small town America. And I was lucky. I worked for some of America’s most iconic companies including Polaroid – which was all about capturing the love of families and sharing the moment on the spot with the people that meant the most to you.

In 1986 I met a woman, and moved in with her, to Bridgeport no less. She was a young dentist who still practices dentistry in Fairfield, on Beach Road, the daughter of a dentist, who grew up in depression New Haven. She grew up in a small house in Easton with her brother, Dad and Mom. Her brother is still in Fairfield. He owns a restaurant once called Breakaway, now Martel. We are all still an extended family bound by the birth of Susan's and my son. I left my job at Nabisco and opened a southern pit barbecue restaurant in Springdale, part of Stamford. And from the moment I opened I took a page from my Dad's way of running a business and said I was going to be a central part of our community. And I did my best. I'm sure you all remember Representative Chris Shays. He was a customer, because he heard about some of my outreach. Senator Blumenthal and Attorney General Jepsen tried to help me launch a program to protect kids after school, called SafeStore. I was on the board of the Stamford Chamber of Commerce working hard to ensure that the smaller Stamford communities would not be forgotten.

As I mentioned, Susan and I had a son. We moved to Trumbull, but the marriage like many, didn't quite move as well. I moved to Fairfield Beach. Our son went to the JCC on Park Avenue for Kindergarten, and for a while went to a private school in Fairfield which turned out not to be such a good idea. In the meantime, his mom and I agreed he should have a religious education and we joined, as singles, Temple Israel in Westport as I knew the office manager there. Her husband owned a store across from me in Springdale. Again, community.

It was the first day of religious school, I walked my son to class. This petite woman walked out with sparkling eyes, put her arm around Aaron and hugged him into her classroom. Up until that point, I had pretty much sworn off dating. But that smile and those eyes. I went back into the office and asked Ann Finder to tell me a little more about Ms. Belkin. Ann said, " Oh Pattie's a wonderful lady, divorced, teaches religious school here, directs our summer program, she's a fourth grade teacher in Weston, and her team teacher is a member of our congregation and"well she jumped up and out of her office saying she was calling the team teacher and was fixing us up. Mind you, I had no idea where Weston was, I was processing everything in seconds, Ann came back, said, all handled, Myra will talk to Pattie, and I was trying to figure out what just happened.

Aaron came back with me, I spent the next six weeks picking Aaron up from religious school, Pattie was told some Dad wanted to ask her out, couldn't figure out who, but really, how many Dad's do any of you know that religiously pick their kids up from religious school? So we went out. And on August 9th, 1997, I became a Westonite, with a new step-daughter, a son going back and forth, still going to private school in Fairfield, and a new wife.

That was twenty-two years ago. I've said, if it wasn't a marriage made in heaven, well it was made in heaven's house. Not too much later, it became evident to Aaron's mom that the private school he was in was a terrible choice and insisted he come to Weston. Which, Pattie, being a teacher, already knew. I said, "hey, wait a second, that's between you and Pattie, you two work it out" (I've gotten a bit smarter as I've gotten older). The following Monday, Aaron was in Weston's 4th grade which was housed then in what is now only the middle school. This is all small town stuff. This would not have happened in a giant plugged together district. Pattie is close to my ex mother-in law and ex-wife, we are all step parents, BUT Samantha and Aaron are real brother and sister. That's how they were known on School Road in Weston.

You see, every child is known on School Road. Really known. By no means am I implying it's a perfect society. I've spent my time, as a Dad, in the principal's office. Our kids never got a break because of who their mother was. And Aaron, well imagine what it's like when your Step Mom is similar to a First Alert alarm system. But it was all good.

In Weston, our kids are not all geniuses from perfect Stepford-like homes. But they are all given a personal bar to exceed. Not compared one to another. We have success stories in Weston, where there would be no success stories in other districts. And not all parents are happy. Not all kids are talented and gifted. But our teachers and administrators know each student, and treat each student with the expectations that they will be successful on School Road and in life. I see that as my wife leaves each day for 10 to 12 hours of expecting the unexpected. And handling it.

A lot has changed in Weston, while a lot has stayed the same. We've had 2-acre zoning since 1954 and a good number of grandfathered smaller plots, but everywhere you turn you can see we still are the bucolic farm community we originally were. Because we have no train or major roadway, the industry we did have has disappeared except for one or two remnants of historical sites, and for the most part we became a home for artists, writers, some commuters, home businesses, people like myself - I used to long haul around the world or different parts of our country making it home on time for our Short Wharf or Company musicals, and concerts. We have chefs, landscapers, plumbers, filmmakers, actors, even a rock star or two – who sent their kids to our public schools.

In the last decade or so, we've had a good number of big homes built. But, we're still a mixture, and we aren't defined by the money we make. Nor are our kids. 16 years ago we had portable classrooms sprouting like weeds. We had to build the intermediate school and it was a battle. But we did it. Who knew that there was going to be this population change, which I personally believe is temporary and as families are having children later and moving from crushing apartments later, the wide open spaces of Weston will offer great enjoyment

and family life as it has for so many others. And it will do the same in other small towns of Connecticut, each with its own character.

I've been in strategy, marketing and advertising for most of my career and anyone who tells you they "know" what makes a person buy what they buy, love what they love, run from them because they'll sell you a bottle of snake oil too. It's a continuous test and learn process. "Buying" a community and a house is pretty much the same. There is a brand image so to speak. And at different points in one's life you search for different "brands" of homes that represent where you are at a certain moment in your lifecycle. So you look. Drive. Walk around (well not so much walk around as opposed to hike in, after you pass some funky little shopping center, 3 lights, one road of schools that shouts "safe", and big trees and depending on your imagination, manicured or scruffy lawns and rocks and walls and brooks, and porches and backyards, and hawks circling in the sky and you take a tour of the schools, and kids are working on projects, not sitting in silent rows, inactive, rather collaborating with others around them, and all sorts of stuff hanging from the walls and ceilings. And that's the moment you know that you've come to a town that is a home. A small town, with small schools, with cops and teachers, and administrators and paras, and coaches that know the kids, 'cause you can see it, feel it.

By the way, you may stop at the K-2 school, Hurlbutt. if you walk into the wrong wing, which won't happen as you'd be kindly stopped and asked who you are, you'd be at our senior center, which is located right next to the youngest of our young students. That energy transfers.

Chances are, you know the name of our town, but may have never visited. I want to tell you a little about us.

I've been told, that from oh, the Sikorsky Bridge on up, legislative members sort of look at Fairfield County as some Burl Ives, "Big Rock Candy Mountain" of good and plenty, and Weston is smack dab in the middle and we're a place it's easy to take some more money from, some more services from, "they don't really need it". It's just not so.

Now, I'm a Democrat. I've been one for a long time. I was one in college and when I got out of school and started working. I stopped being a Democrat in the Summer of 1968. You may recall watching the Democratic National Convention on TV and Democratic Mayor Richard Daly looking down from the podium and calling the Jewish Governor of the great state of Connecticut some pretty vile names. I remember taking the train up to Tarrytown screaming at my Dad, a Democrat, and while I eventually returned to my roots about the time of the Watergate break-in, the joke was really on me as my Dad became a loyal Republican till the day he died. But I've been back for a while.

And here in Weston just two years ago, I ran for my first public office - as a Democrat. So I write this as a Weston Planning & Zoning Commissioner with a (D) after it. I'm proud of that. And I want to stay proud. I want my neighbors who voted for me to know that when I said I don't vote Red or Blue I vote right or wrong, that I meant it. To me, that means keeping what's important about Weston, what's important about the other small towns in Connecticut, what's important about Connecticut itself alive, thriving, and offering a honeycomb of close-knit communities with hands-on school districts and senior care that holds the responsibilities of what community means, dear.

To those of us in Weston, and our sister towns, that means our schools and how we educate and care for our children. Keeping them close, and having their educators close to us. We just can't abide by the fact that someone would even consider harming the very essence of what we came here for. What "small town" really means. What a small town education accomplishes.

So recently, we conducted a town survey. We had professionals in market research who live in Weston conduct the survey, primarily to be used as we develop our 2020 plan for conservation and development. Additionally, to make sure we serve all parts of our community well. Provide the services for, and understand the needs wants and desires of the people here – those who recently moved to Weston, as well as those who have spent decades here raising their families. Some who are empty nesters, some living alone, some multi-generational. At the same time we wanted to better understand what will continue to draw people to Weston in the future to the extent that prediction is possible.

And while I would be happy to share the complete study, I thought you'd find some of our learnings interesting. The survey was completed by almost 60% of our households.

50% are 35-54 years old

40% are over 55 with almost 10% over 75

Almost 35% have lived in Weston over 21 years , 29% 11-20 years, 16% 6-10 years, & 20% 5 years or less.

Over 50% have one or more children under 18 at home and another 17% have over 18s

It's clear, when they move here, they stay here, which is why we say we're not just a small town, we're a big family.

And, here's why we came to Weston:

Over 75% came here because of our school system

37% because of our quality of life

36% because of our safe environment

33% because of our two-acre zoning

School Road. It's the number one reason, by far, people come, and even when their children grow up and leave, the combination of safety, quality of life, space, and yes, kids all over the place, keep us here. Our schools bring us here and I believe they keep us young and vibrant, even when our bodies are somewhat frail and tell us differently.

Our children, depending when their families move to Weston, are on one road from Kindergarten through 12th grade graduation. To say they get to know each other well, and their teachers and principals them well, is an understatement. It's been proven over and over again that this type of community in education offers the best environment for learning. Our outcomes year after year are a testament to validate this thesis. Our students' contributions in the adult world also showcase the validity of small vs. large.

I would expect you to question me, and perhaps even harrumph here or there at the strong statement above, and of course, I can only speak for myself. But my son was an OK student in Weston. When he got here, there were gaps in his education you couldn't jump over. His teachers earned their keep! Over the years here, he grew a lot. And he came to working hard academically kind of late, but he did show up. Nurtured by some incredible teachers at WHS. He went to Indiana University. When he graduated, he had three job offers, was president of his fraternity (having made some amazing changes there) and on the ethics committee. He went to work for E. & J. Gallo in the management development program. Very few graduates get into that program. He did very well there too. A little over a year later, he called and asked how I would feel if he resigned. I asked why, and he told me he was developing this food product and couldn't do both and I told him that now was the time to take risks. I wasn't happy when that risk was in Denver, but he went. You can go on line and go to www.roosterandlark.com and see what he's created. A couple of months ago, he was first runner up in a major natural foods "pitch slam". Not yet 29. You can see the video on line. I asked Pattie where he got that skill. She looked at me and said, from being in Short Wharf and Company. School Road. Aaron is getting married this July 4th. Wonderful young woman. So what is the connection? His best man. His best friend from Weston Middle School. In fact, five Weston friends were together this past weekend in Breckenridge. We have strong bonds. Our daughter, my stepdaughter, is in Denver too. She's a software engineer and has already climbed 16 14,000 kilometer peaks, among other things that drive her Mom crazy, and has close bonds to Weston friends.

Our story is not special to Weston, while it is personal. And while I think my wife's work and dedication to Weston education is nothing short of heroic, she's one of many here. She just happens to have a short commute. The jobs have gotten arguably tougher and the budgets tighter. The state, to date, has taken so much from us by way of financial contributions, it would have brought any number of districts to its knees. Holds true for a lot of the small

towns that have seen contributions that were once fair given the taxes we contribute to the state, arbitrarily taken away.

We get .04% of our budget from the state, but we continue to excel. It's our fierce independence, focus, and drive to give our children the best we can and keep them close to us. That is all we have. You have taken so much. Please, don't push us and try and take more.

For my esteemed Democratic colleagues on this committee from New Haven, I understand your difficulty. But widening districts isn't going to help solve your issues, decades in the making. You host one of America's, indeed the world's most prestigious universities. It has a \$29.4 billion dollar endowment. It has a world class educational school. They need to do more. They must do more. More than just cover your \$14.5 million dollar gap. Before I wrote this testimony, I visited the Yale website and specifically the Endowment social responsibility page. There was no mention of New Haven. I submit, there should be. Please understand, I am not saying Yale doesn't contribute, but I ask if they can work with the committee to tackle the large city education problems with innovation as opposed to programs that have the strong potential to harm small town Connecticut and their school systems such as you see in Weston. Because without the framework of the towns and the methodologies that have proven results, you will see nothing but an uncontrollable spiral downward. And that spiral will be led by proposals if passed like SB 738, 457, 874. Please don't let that happen.

And finally I would invite you to come down and visit our schools. Speak to my wife about our lives, her passions, her love of education (her mom, at 90 is still teaching having been in the classroom, an administrator, a university professor at NYU, Queens College and LIU, and a founder of Usdan Summer Program for the Creative Arts.) Pattie will be happy to tell you and show you how she continues to shepherd her charges from 3rd to 5th grades on to middle school ready for their next level of education.

Thank you for allowing me to give you a lens into why I feel so strongly as to why these proposals, SB 738, SB 457, and SB 874 are not in the best interests of us all.

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