

To: Planning & Development Committee

Date: March 15, 2021

From: Alexis Harrison

I have been involved with zoning and environmental issues for most of my adult life, and I've never seen such an attack on our local zoning and land use as I have today by our General Assembly. I strongly believe these proposals, specifically, HB 6107, will weaken the planning and zoning commissions that our 169 towns and cities have had for decades.

Over the years, I've sat at dozens and dozens of zoning meetings as a neighborhood and environmental activist and I know firsthand how critical they are to residents and the people, whether it's an applicant or a neighbor in opposition, who need their voices represented.

Zoning Commissions also serve as smaller versions of our Environmental Protection Agency which is critical when climate change has become the most pressing issue of our time. Decisions made by our local commissions on zoning protect our natural resources; they protect public safety and they protect the unique nature of each community -- whether it's a small hamlet, a town or city.

There is nothing uniform about land; it is all unique and having a one-size fits all plan is unacceptable to me and it should be to you, too as individuals who represent distinct and different towns across our State. Dismantling the rights of community decision making will not have a positive result for Connecticut.

In that spirit, I am greatly concerned with HB 6107, notably a section that calls for a working group:

..."The Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management, or the secretary's designee, shall convene and chair a working group to develop and recommend to the secretary guidelines and incentives for compliance...." and it goes on. The proposed "working group" is problematic - the working group membership does not represent all stakeholders, most notably representatives from environmental groups. Tackling climate change should be our biggest priority, and absence of that voice is an affront to Connecticut's citizens.

It also appears that most of the new laws being proposed by our lawmakers in Hartford are focused on shifting population from cities to suburbs and towns rather than re-populating cities. One such proposed law for example, seeks to expand the development of multi-family housing by making it 'as-of-right' within a half mile of all commercial and transit areas (which would comprise very large portions of many towns).

-Does creating more multi-family homes in the suburbs and renting them at full market value create opportunities for the disadvantaged?

-Why aren't we empowering home ownership?

-And how does 8-30g, our State's affordable housing law play into these changes? Has that been discussed?

We can't pass laws and ask questions later. That happens too often, and to the detriment of the people.

Before making fundamental changes to laws that would affect the permanent changes to that most finite of resources- the land- all stakeholders should be heard from, all unintended consequences should be studied and considered and all State goals concerning our beleaguered cities should be addressed.

One thing that has struck me about this process is the lack of representation of residents which I don't understand. I am disappointed that my own State Representative hasn't held a single virtual meeting or webinar on these issues. Where is that exchange of dialogue that you speak of? Where is the listening and learning?

I would also like to note that my town of Fairfield is working very hard to build more affordable housing. In fact, Fairfield just passed an accessory dwelling unit regulation supported by housing advocates and the town's affordable housing committee, after months of discussion by our volunteer Town Plan & Zoning to vastly expand accessory dwelling units while reflecting the design standards of our town. But as Senator Hwang has pointed out earlier today, our ADU regulations must exactly match the new proposed law on ADUs, to quote- "noncompliant existing regulation shall 428 become null and void." The bill not only doesn't recognize our town's good faith efforts to expand and diversify housing options, but it burdens our volunteer lay commission with re-doing what is done and further placing added state mandated time constraints on the commission. In that same vein, in Fairfield, we already have had a great amount of multifamily housing being built near our transit areas which already require 10% of affordable units.

Our TPZ has approved them commensurate with the unique aspects of our town's infrastructure, goals of pedestrian walkways, design standards, topography, and impact on nearby built environment. In short, we're already doing it. The new laws would ignore the hard work being done. That's unfair/

I also believe the new proposed laws would also not help with affordability- in Fairfield, just this month a multifamily developer informed our Town Plan & Zoning that non-affordable rents go for \$3,000 a month.

I ask you today to put these proposals on hold. There is no immediate rush to push these proposals through during a time when residents are trying to return to normal life after a year of enduring a global pandemic, caring for family members, and educating their children during very stressful periods. Please table these proposals until you can convene in person, legislators can hold in-person community workshops with their constituents in their districts to discuss the pros and cons of these laws and there is more transparency with the process.

Thank you,
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