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February 19, 2021

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Testimony Regarding HB 6439

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Hartley, Representative Gibson and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee,

I would like to thank the committee for their past support and ask them to continue to fund the Westville Village Renaissance Alliance (WVRA), a small but mighty organization central to the economic vitality and cultural identity of Westville Village. As you may know, Westville Village is a historic commercial district in the heart of a New Haven neighborhood, Westville, a place that people of all ages, incomes and ethnicities are proud to call home. Westville is known and loved for its vibrant arts scene and its strong community spirit.

WVRA plays many critical roles in keeping Westville vibrant, and never more than in this year, when Covid-19 hit our small businesses so hard. In response to the pandemic we identified key services we could provide our small businesses. We created the Westville Small Business Fund and awarded \$37,000 to 32 small businesses in our community. We raised the money through donations and through our signature event, the Westville Artwalk, which became the Virtual Artwalk. Virtual Artwalk also provided us an opportunity to hire many of the local graphic artists, musicians and technicians in our community who had seen their business evaporate as well. With a virtual event, our entire budget was able to be plowed right back into our community, to people suffering some of the most difficult business blows.

As federal funding and other opportunities became available, WVRA staff and board led zoom workshops and one on one consulting sessions with the businesses and self-employed entrepreneurs and artists who make Westville Village their home. We worked to ensure that every business knew about and took advantage of every opportunity available to them, and helps many to secure PPP and EIDL loans and other monies, including several DECD grants. We created a website, www.virtualwestville.com, to promote our shops and restaurants through the holidays and beyond. Looking forward, we have secured CARES funding to create an open-air market in the heart of Westville for social-distanced shopping this spring, and are completing a project to celebrate our restaurant with portraits of the people making them work on our Whalley Avenue banners.

Our on-going efforts in Westville were key factor in the significant growth that was well underway when the pandemic hit. I am happy to report that much of that growth has continued apace. In the past year, Westville has had five new restaurants open their doors: Camacho Garage, from celebrated chef Arturo Franco-Camacho; kosher sushi at Fin and Scale; new Peruvian at Amaru; Syrian delicacies at Pistachio, and the return of our beloved Delaney's Restaurant and Taproom, which was lost to a fire in 2014.

The Children's Community Programs of CT completed the renovation of their 15,000 square foot building and moved in. And a new 129-unit mixed use development at 500 Blake St received its permissions to begin construction.

We are grateful for the successes of the past year, and mindful of the challenges that continue to bear down on our small businesses during this difficult time. We will continue to recruit, support, amplify and advocate for Westville while providing our vibrant community with opportunities to come together and celebrate in any way we can. And I hope you will continue to provide us with this critical support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth Donius".

Elizabeth Donius
Executive Director
Westville Village Renaissance Alliance