

**Brian Farnen**  
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Dear Planning and Development Committee Members,

As a resident of Fairfield and as a former State Representative, I am writing today in my opposition to of S.B. No. 1024: AN ACT CONCERNING ZONING AUTHORITY, CERTAIN DESIGN GUIDELINES, QUALIFICATIONS OF CERTAIN LAND USE OFFICIALS AND CERTAIN SEWAGE DISPOSAL SYSTEMS.

Protecting home rule and local decision making in education, zoning and property taxes is more important than ever due to recent legislative proposals coming out of Hartford that transfer decision making from our towns to the State (Notably S.B. 1024, and H.B. 6107, H.B. 6611, H.B. 6112, H.B. 6613, S.B. 1026, S.B. 1027, H.B. 6107).

Instead of top down, one size fits all mandates that take away local control and decision making, let us address the real problem which includes our cities failing, people exiting Connecticut at a rapid pace and the continuous 'brain drain' of recent college graduates not moving back to Connecticut. State leaders need to be addressing these problems together with real solutions for a more prosperous Connecticut instead of attacking municipalities that have managed their towns responsibly.

As an alternative to these top-down mandates, I propose below that we focus on the underlying causes of inequity and the lack of prosperity in our wonderful State.

## **EDUCATION**

Without question, every child in this state deserves a first-rate education that allows them to succeed.

Many city schools receive substantial state funding to supplement their local tax funded education spending. Yet their students are still struggling. Isn't it time to address these concerns to improve underperforming public schools? Alternative options should be made available to parents in these districts, such as Charter Schools and School Choice. Just moving a small percentage of students out of underperforming districts to more successful ones does not improve access to quality education and sweeps the larger problem under the rug.

The inner city education crisis has been on full display in New Haven throughout the pandemic with New Haven schools on a full remote schedule through January. How can this happen and where were the advocates for the children as many were falling off the radar screen and not checking into school on a daily basis. Legislators should be discussing this as this is a crisis will have a long term impact.

### **Charter Schools**

We need to encourage charter schools (majority of children of charter schools are composed of diverse backgrounds), they're underfunded and it's a mere line item on a budget so funding is always at risk. Connecticut could look to NY State as a roadmap for funding stability and a successful charter school system.

### **School Choice, Vouchers and Funding Following the Child**

Another option would be to institute the “follow the child” method of funding education. In essence, students are assigned a certain amount per year for their education and that amount is paid to the school they choose to attend. Along with saving substantial amounts of taxpayer money, this approach would also offer an incentive for schools to provide a better education to their students, in order to retain the funding each child would carry with him or her.

## **JOBS AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Connecticut needs to grow our urban centers as well as the entire State economy - there is no net new job growth in CT since 2000. Creating an environment that is conducive to job growth will do more for our low to moderate income earners than top down one size fits all zoning mandates in the suburbs.

One party rule in Hartford and urban centers results in a lack of accountability and only one set of solutions.

Connecticut’s businesses and manufacturers have consistently raised concerns about the state’s hostile climate for industry, created by the significant tax and regulatory burdens placed on small and large corporations. Let’s address this so we can have real job growth in our urban centers and provide incentives for encouraging job growth in our urban centers and within close proximity to mass transit.

Our economic growth strategy must include stronger support for our cities but the State needs to tie greater economic development support (i.e., State funding) to accountability and structural fiscal changes in each city that receives such funding (Hartford has agreed to some of this with moderate success.)

Just throwing more money at the problem has not worked and many big city mayors may welcome this behind closed doors as they understand such fiscal reforms are needed but the political reality of enacting such reforms in a City would be near impossible to enact at the municipal City level and would likely lead to electoral defeat in a Democratic primary.

## **HOUSING**

Connecticut has one of the worst housing markets in the U.S. over the past thirty years. The Connecticut housing market is undergoing a short-term positive bump due to the COVID pandemic but this is not sustainable. There is not a housing shortage crisis in CT as the population and housing values have been stagnant. The real issue is the lack of economic activity and educational opportunity as people of means move out of our urban centers and poverty increases with a lack of economic activity.

We also need to revisit income restrictions on urban housing. This well-intentioned policy leads to concentrated poverty and discourages urban gentrification as we seek to rebuild our urban centers with a more diverse housing stock that can attract millennials, retirees, etc.

The need for more diverse housing in Connecticut needs to be addressed, but the unique needs and geography of each community (including cities, suburbs, and rural areas) must be considered. The above noted bills will:

- Force municipalities to erect specific types of housing developments within a ½ mile of transit stations OR ¼ mile of commercial corridors

- Eliminate local control over certain types of housing (location-based, accessory, 2+ units) and allow certain developments to occur without a local public hearing
- Create new mandates - including training staff, assimilating local regulations and shouldering new costs
- Affect the environment and drinking water statewide by ignoring the responsibilities of municipalities who host waterways, open space
- Impact traffic flow, parking demands
- Drive up residency at a rate which outpaces the capacities of local resources/services - Police, Fire, Schools
- Overburden the public water and sewer infrastructure (if available)
- Require access to public transportation (if available)

## **PROPERTY TAXES**

The recently proposed statewide property tax is a bad idea as Connecticut is already overtaxed. This proposal also hurts renters and Fairfield County, which is the economic engine for the state hardest.

A better approach is to implement a property tax cap, which has shown to be successful in New York and Massachusetts, reduce government spending and reign in overly generous public employee benefits.

## **CONCLUSION**

Connecticut and our urban centers have seen stagnant growth since 2000. Top-down solutions that transfer power from our towns to the State is not going to fix this. Only by reinvesting in our urban centers in a new way, encouraging job growth and greater accountability in our school systems will real change and reform be possible.

Sincerely,

Brian Farnen