

Testimony Before the Planning and Development Committee – 3.15.2021

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Planning and Development Committee and Co-Chairs Rep. McGee and Senator Lopes,

My name is John Harmon and I live in West Hartford. I came to Connecticut in 1980 to take a faculty position in the Geography Department of Central Connecticut State University, then a state college. One of my teaching responsibilities was in the planning track of our department's major. It was a good fit for me since I almost became a city planner and I had already had a strong professional interest in how cities develop and change. I still have that interest.

The power to regulate land use exists at several levels. My wife Joyce and I own 6,000 square feet of my state but there are limits to what I can do there. I can't open a nursery or greenhouse or bank. These are reasonable limits that preserve the health and welfare not just of me and my family but my neighbors and the overall community. A lot of my personal power has been taken away and that is fine, within limits.

So where does that power go? Now practically all of it is in the hands of local regulations, officials and bodies like planning, zoning, and inland wetland commissions. The state has seen fit to cede this authority to the municipalities. But you can, and should, take some of that power back and ensure that certain land uses are regulated in a way that you think is appropriate. The towns get their power from you; they do not have it automatically.

Some towns, like mine, have used their considerable power to create a community of diverse housing where people in a considerable range of income can afford to live. West Hartford certainly is not perfect in this respect and has a troubled history of racial segregation, but we have been trying. Other towns have used their powers of zoning and planning to create homogeneous, white communities with a narrow range of income levels which forces those who can't afford it into other communities, notably our cities. Attempts to build affordable housing are usually met with strong opposition which local elected officials find hard to resist. In fact, they may have been elected in part because they are in favor of those practices.

I have watched this not change at all in the forty years I have lived here. Put simply, the towns that practice these exclusionary policies have held onto that power. Only the state can take some of that power back and, I almost hate to use this word, force the towns to accept more diversity of housing, income and race within their boundaries. You need to change the fundamental balance of power that currently exists among families, town and the state. The state, through the legislature and the governor, has the power to change that relationship and create more diverse, better communities. I urge you to do this by voting SB-01024 out of committee and letting the entire legislature take up this important legislation.