

To: CT General Assembly Planning & Development Committee

From: Elizabeth Hibino, Portland CT

Re: SB 1024, An Act Concerning Zoning Authority, Certain Design Guidelines, Qualifications Of Certain Land Use Officials And Certain Sewage Disposal Systems

Date: March 15, 2021

Dear Chairman Cassano, Chairwoman McCarthy Vahey, Vice Chairman Needleman, Vice Chairwoman Goupil, Ranking Member Senator Hwang, Ranking Member Zullo, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Portland Social Justice Coalition, I want to express my support for SB 1024. The PSJC was formed in July 2020 in response to police violence and protests against systemic racism across our country and conversations here in Portland about social justice issues which affect our own community. We are a growing network of community members who are dedicated to helping our town be the best it can be.

Our mission is to identify the needs of our community by listening, learning and having the difficult conversations necessary to empower our fellow community members to raise their voices and begin to bridge the gaps to create a more equitable, inclusive community.

As we educate ourselves about what it means to be an equitable and inclusive community, we learn how important it is for towns in our state to offer housing that is affordable and welcoming. Bill 1024 addresses many issues which would bring housing and zoning standards up to the 21st century.

The small town of Portland is over 95% white ([CT Data Collaborative](#)). While many of us wish it were a more diverse community, the fact is that like almost all towns in CT, people of color were systematically kept out due to government policies such as redlining, the denial of homeowners' loans to non-whites, government support of discriminatory real estate practices, and other such exclusionary tactics. All of these helped lead to the accumulation of wealth of white families while Black and Brown families remain at a disadvantage ([A Steady Habit of Segregation](#)). Our state is one of the most segregated in the country ([TrendCT](#)), and this hurts all of us. Communities need diversity, affordable housing, accessibility to transportation and jobs, and sensible zoning policies in order to thrive. SB 1024 addresses all of these issues.

Less than 9% of Portland's housing stock is considered affordable according to state [data](#), and this number would be much much smaller if it were not for the Portland Housing Authority which maintains 2 developments in our town. Wait lists for these units are always long, and are currently not even open. Wait lists for both neighborhoods have been closed since July 2019 ([Portland Housing Authority](#)). At the same time, almost 29% of our residents are cost-burdened, spending 30% or more of their income on housing ([CT Data Collaborative](#)). Clearly, there is more of a demand than a supply, even in our small town. One easy way to increase affordable housing without infringing on the current zoning, is to loosen the restrictions around accessory dwelling units.

The bill would make it easier for residents to build detached accessory dwelling units in Portland and across the state. While Portland already allows attached units "as of right", allowing a detached structure on property that is already zoned for residential use makes sense and would allow more

flexibility in housing options. This would benefit many groups of people: for example, seniors who are on a fixed income and could use help paying the bills, single professionals who only need a small apartment, families who would like to build an in-law apartment to help an aging relative, and so on.

Another way to help communities like ours become more welcoming is to create a specific definition for zoning officials to use when considering “character.” Historically, including “character” in zoning decisions leads to discrimination against people of color and lower income folks. If character is defined in terms of architecture, that helps planning and zoning officials to do their job more easily, and eliminates discrimination in this process. For a town like Portland, we desperately need to become more inclusive and open to all kinds of people and families. While we can still preserve the architectural and historical character of buildings in our town, it is unacceptable for projects to be turned down due to claims of some closed-minded residents that allowing “those types of people” into our community would be detrimental - fears that are based on myths about affordable housing. These exact fears were voiced when affordable housing was considered as part of a development that is still in the planning stages in our town. Ultimately, the part of the plan which included affordable housing was scrapped.

Under SB 1024, the state would create a working group whose task would be to produce model codes that municipalities can adopt, to help them guide their planning and zoning decisions. This would be far more cost-efficient and productive, as opposed to the \$2 million that CT has spent recently on encouraging towns to adopt Incentive Housing Zones which has only produced 28 units of housing ([Desegregate CT](#)). Portland is one such town that received an IHZ proposal, which was turned down by our zoning officials, in favor of making other changes.

One of our biggest challenges here in Portland for adding an affordable housing development, are the strict water and sewer guidelines. Updating standards regarding sewerage systems would benefit our small towns and offer more options to increase the diversity of housing. This would help spread out affordable housing throughout our town, rather than keeping it concentrated in our downtown area. Currently, multi-family housing is almost entirely in our downtown district, where reliance on town water and sewer causes an increase in cost-of-living for our lower income families. This contributes to the perpetuation of the wealth gap and generational poverty.

Another important component of this bill is the training for town officials, which would save towns enormous amounts of money which is spent when zoning officials are sued for violating regulatory processes ([Desegregate CT](#)). While our zoning commissioners in Portland do receive education, it should be mandatory for our every town and city so that we can ensure that the processes are followed correctly and that discrimination does not occur. Planning and zoning officials are often volunteers and cannot be expected to learn everything they need to know, without any state-guided education. An annual training would help town governments and residents alike.

SB 1024 and its many provisions will ensure greater opportunities to open up our state, especially our small towns. In order to move forward in a just and equitable way, we must work toward undoing the damage of the past. While there is so much that we love about our town and our state, we can do better. On behalf of the Portland Social Justice Coalition, I urge you to pass this bill. Thank you so much for your time.