

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

I write to urge your support for SB 1024 to reform zoning laws in Connecticut with the goal of increasing housing supply and expanding the diversity of housing types in our towns. As a member of the Board of Finance in Canton, I know that to remain vibrant, retain current residents and attract new ones, improve economic development, and hold down property tax increases, we need measures that facilitate the construction of different types of housing *and* preserve the rural character of the town by protecting open space.

Such measures include making it easier for homeowners to add accessory dwelling units to their current homes or for builders to create new homes with accessory dwelling units; emphasizing the construction of multifamily—such as 2- to 4-unit—housing near “Main Street” areas, which contributes to the vibrancy of local businesses and fosters walkable, bikeable neighborhoods; and reducing unnecessary and burdensome parking requirements on some housing.

Canton suffers from zoning regulations that reward the construction of large, single-family houses on large lots and restrict or limit the construction of more diverse types of housing. The town fails to gain residents of different ages, fails to retain residents once their children finish school, has less economic development, has higher property tax rates, and suffers more environmental destruction as a result of current zoning restrictions.

For the town to be economically and culturally vibrant, we need to be a place where residents of all ages and life stages can find housing that meets their needs. For young people just out of college who are considering whether they can return to the community in which they grew up, the lack of apartments or accessory dwelling units makes living in Canton out of reach. For young couples or families just starting out, the lack of smaller houses—perhaps in the form of half of a two-family house—makes Canton unaffordable. For empty-nesters, the decision to downsize becomes perforce a decision to leave the town where they have made friends and raised their family, because there are so few apartments or smaller houses available. For those hoping to age in place in their homes, or for residents hoping to care for aging parents, restrictions on accessory dwelling units make doing so more difficult.

Fortunately, there is not actually a trade-off between measures that increase the quantity and diversity of housing types in a town and the property values of existing homeowners. On the contrary, extensive research has shown that property values *increase* for those in existing single-family houses who live closer to newly constructed multi-family housing. Similarly, adding an accessory dwelling unit *increases* a house’s value, and changing zoning to make it easier to add one is a gift to property owners.

Increasing the quantity and diversity of housing in Canton also has the benefit for current homeowners of helping to keep increases in our property tax rate at a minimum. As a Board of Finance member, I hear with alarm of residents’ intentions to move out of town when their children graduate from high school. For the benefit of all, we need to create the kind of town that residents want to stay in and contribute to both economically and socially once their children are grown. The creation of new and diverse types of housing expands our tax base, keeps taxpayers from fleeing when their children are grown, and helps keep tax rates lower for all.

Finally, zoning reform that facilitates multifamily housing—such as 2- to 4-unit buildings near “Main Street” areas and accessory dwelling units throughout the town—is good for the environment. As set forth in our Plan of Conservation and Development, Canton residents treasure our “rural character” and open space. Unfortunately, the construction of single-family houses on large, 2 to 5 acre lots—the majority of housing construction in town over the past 30 years—is the worst thing that can happen to farmland, forests, and preservation of open space. Such construction breaks up the continuous stretches of habitat important for the survival of many plant and animal species. Far from preserving “rural character,” such development creates suburban sprawl. We can increase the supply of housing *and* protect open space in town by allowing greater diversity and in some cases density in our housing stock.

Again, I urge you to support zoning reform for Connecticut that will increase the overall supply and diversity of housing types to the benefit of both current and future residents, increase our town’s economic vibrancy while holding tax rates down, and protect our treasured open space.

Sincerely,

Katie Kenney

Canton, CT