

To: CT General Assembly Planning & Development Committee  
From: Evonne M. Klein, Darien, 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

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

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Evonne Klein, I am the former Commissioner of Housing for the State of Connecticut, the former First Selectwoman of Darien, currently serve as the Interim CEO of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, and am testifying here today as a resident of the Town of Darien in **support of SB1024**.

You know the facts – while Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the nation, we are also one of the most segregated, and maintain one of the highest achievement and wealth gaps in the country. Many of our zoning policies directly contribute to this institutionalized segregation and disparity. Laws that require McMansion size lots, unnecessary numbers of parking spaces and prohibit apartment-style homes all contribute to the injustice and disparity in Connecticut. You know what the data demonstrates that 73% of Blacks and 73% of Latino population live in areas of low opportunity compared to 26% of Whites and 36% of Asians.

It's important these facts should be kept in mind and the goal of desegregating the state at the forefront as you deliberate on this comprehensive bill which addresses the very challenges we face as local communities and as a state.

Change is never easy. But we can't let old fears get in the way of building a better Connecticut. Questions like whether more inclusive communities will "burden" our schools, negatively impact property values and where our new neighbors "come from" fall into the racist traps of the past that hold us back today. When I was First Selectwoman of Darien, we prioritized the construction of new, affordable homes in our community; the adoption of an Affordable Housing Plan which is being revised; and adopted an Inclusionary Zoning Regulation. Although we made some local progress, I did not fully appreciate the injustices caused by zoning laws, demonstrating our efforts were not enough to create necessary change. As the Commissioner of Housing, I saw firsthand how bad zoning policies contribute to institutional racism. If you don't have a safe, affordable home it's harder to find a job, go to school and provide for your family's future. That's why, during my time as commissioner, we contributed to the construction of 22,000 affordable homes across Connecticut, and championed a number of zoning reforms including state-wide Inclusionary Zoning, revising 8-2 the Zoning Enabling Act and others.

As a private citizen, I remain active in the housing and zoning arena as a co-founder of Darien Talks Housing which is a monthly fact-based thoughtful discussion on housing and zoning issues including 2021 proposed legislation. Professor Bronin, Representatives McCarthy-Vahey, Majority Leader Rojas and Senator Anwar have been featured presenters along with planners and thought leaders in the state and region. We've received tremendous support for the series as well as for the proposed reforms. Not a week has gone by without someone contacting me for help in finding an affordable home not only in Darien, but also in Fairfield County.

As we continue to learn more about housing and zoning in Darien one statistic worth noting, which will have meaning for you, is that 29% of Darien residents are housing cost burdened said another way 2200 households of 7400 are housing cost burdened. That's 2200 families who struggle every day.

Also, worth noting, in Darien as the Zoning Atlas demonstrates, we've done most of what's being prosed in SB 1024.

- Cap Costly Parking Mandates - With some work to do on parking – requiring 3 spaces for a studio apartment and one bedroom - which is unreasonable. We've modernized our parking requirements for our businesses and it's time to do so for housing.
- Main Street Housing - We've built cluster homes in single family neighborhoods that sell in excess of \$1million. It's time to build middle housing where it makes sense on our main streets and in our downtown.
- Training for Commissioners - Training is already offered to our Planning and Zoning Commissioners and some do attend.
- Accessory Dwelling Units - ADU's are not approved "as of right" but the Planning and Zoning Commission has indicated they may be considering local regulation to do so.
- Model Codes for Building and Streets - Darien has adopted a model block sidewalk standard, but has not adopted model codes for building; however, when visiting the downtown, it is clear that P&Z adheres to certain codes and standards.
- Technical Standards for 21<sup>st</sup> Century - Darien is a bronze rated sustainable community, clearly our environmental health is important to the community and elected officials. It would follow that modernizing sewage standards are clearly important to the Town's efforts. During the years efforts have been made to improve traffic to direct people to our businesses downtown and to lessen the impact of I-95 on our small town.
- Transit Oriented Development - The Town has also made progress in building multifamily housing near our to 2 rail stations with one development underway in Noroton Heights, one pending in Noroton Heights and another development breaking ground downtown.

Darien was founded in the 1800's as an exclusive community for wealthy people. That was reaffirmed in the early 1900's with elected leaders declaring that Darien will be

home to single family residences only and no businesses. We have seen slow change in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the building of multifamily homes. The early 2000's. saw more rapid change with the revitalization of Darien's Downtown adding more mixed-use developments. Today, it's time to the next step enacting smart zoning change as proposed in SB 1024. Providing tools to all Connecticut municipalities.

As elected officials and state and town leaders we have the obligation to tell the truth and not incite fear. This was and is an opportunity to educate residents on what these proposals truly are by presenting the facts. Most people who have attended a presentation by Professor Bronin have realized that these proposals will help build a better Connecticut.

With all of the technical terms and legal standards surrounding this issue it's important to remember the people whose lives will be made better by adopting this bill. So, when we talk about density, unit count, parking, TOD and ADUs we are really talking about: children having a stable home to come back to after school, a working mom being able to afford to both feed her family and the roof over her family's head, senior citizens being able to stay in the communities they helped build.

I encourage you to approve SB 1024.

Thank you.