

To: CT General Assembly Planning & Development Committee

From: Emily Oumano, West Hartford

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 Members of the Committee:

My middle school in Naugatuck once hosted a show as a special treat for the students. It was a juggling act with magic tricks. The performer just so happened to be Asian. While he was doing the show, a group of 12-year-olds in the audience kept singing a song at him, interrupting his act, and trying to distract him. Later, I found out the song was from a scene in some movie that mocked Asian people. I don't remember what the song was, or which of my classmates sang along, but I remember seeing a group of at least three (maybe more) white students racially harassing a man in front of our entire grade.

If those kids had more diverse friends, teachers, and neighbors, maybe they wouldn't have thought that was okay. But they grew up in Connecticut, one of the most racially segregated states in the country.¹ The kids who sang that song are now 30-year-old adults. They probably still don't have diverse friendships. They probably live in communities with neighbors who are mostly like them, and they send their children to schools with kids who are mostly like them.

I'm white, and I grew up in a segregated Connecticut town, so I'm ashamed to say this way of life seemed normal to me when I was middle school. It wasn't until I was older that I started to research how explicitly racist housing policies became exclusionary zoning practices. We created de facto segregated neighborhoods across the state on purpose. This was done with intention, and it can only be undone with intention. We must make it right, before our communities fall apart.

Serious flaws in Connecticut's housing market are starting to show. Enrollment in most of our school districts declined over the past ten years, likely (in part) because it's not affordable for families with children to live here.² About one out of every six families in Connecticut spends half of their income on housing.³ There is a shortage of affordable rental homes for low income households in our state.⁴

¹ <https://prrac.org/pdf/hartford-segregation-report-2020.pdf>

² <http://ctschoofinance.org/students/enrollment>

³ <https://www.ctdatahaven.org/reports/datahaven-community-wellbeing-survey>

⁴ <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/connecticut>

The cost of housing places a huge financial burden on people who earn less than the area median income in our state.⁵ Given the fact the racial income gap is worse here in Connecticut than elsewhere in the country, this severely limits minorities' housing options.⁶

The cost of housing in our state is unaffordable, inequitable, and unsustainable. We need more abundant housing and more diverse types of housing. I am in favor of SB 1024 because it will help accomplish those goals.

We also need more diverse communities. I can't say if our segregated community planted the seeds of bigotry in my classmates' hearts, but I grew up there too, and I can confidently say it let the seeds flourish. Their racist ideas were probably never challenged by their families, friends, or neighbors. When you are part of a segregated system, you remain ignorant of the hardships faced by people outside of your community. That ignorance becomes indifference, and that indifference allows the system to perpetuate itself.

Back in middle school, when I witnessed that act of racism, I didn't do anything about it. The school didn't do anything. The parents of those kids didn't do anything. Our community wasn't as strong as the seeds of bigotry that grew there.

We have a chance to do something about it now. I support SB 1024 because it will make it easier to build more types of homes, and help increase our housing stock. This will make housing more affordable to more diverse Connecticut residents, and it will make our communities stronger.

⁵ https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DOH/AHPP-Guidebook_RPA_120120.pdf

⁶ <https://ctvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SOWC-2020-Report-Final.pdf>