

To: CT General Assembly Planning & Development Committee

From: Willa Perlman / Danbury, 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 Members of the Committee:

I grew up in Redding, Connecticut, and attended ER9 public schools from third grade through my high school graduation in 2014. In my family home, my only sister, Maggie, and I were raised to believe fundamentally in equality, love, and kindness (more on this later). Neither I nor Maggie began our education in the public school system, instead attending private and charter schools in Danbury and Norwalk. As a result, as children, we learned and lived much of our daily lives with people of all races, ethnicities, cultures, religions, backgrounds, and experiences. For that early life experience in diversity, equity, & inclusion—long before I'd known any of those words—I am profoundly grateful.

My experiences with racial diversity, equity, & inclusion at John Read Middle and Joel Barlow High School, where approximately 96% of the student body and 90% of the staff was white, were markedly different. In high school, when I started dating a Black classmate, several of my peers made unwanted, offensive remarks derived from racist stereotypes, and even worse, a handful of my friends' parents suddenly became far less approving of my friendship with their child. Then, of course, after that relationship ended of its own accord, when I began dating another classmate who happened to also be Black, the comments began pouring in again, only more disturbing in their content and magnitude.

Here I was, an impressionable teenager and a hopeless romantic, entering perfectly healthy relationships for no reason other than wanting to, being barraged with unsolicited, blatantly racist commentary. I can't imagine, I can only empathize, with what my former partners in young love endured from their predominantly white classmates.

In *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah writes, "We tell people to follow their dreams, but you can only dream of what you can imagine, and depending on where you come from, your imagination can be quite limited. Growing up in Soweto, our dream was to put another room on our house. Maybe have a driveway. Maybe, someday, a cast-iron gate at the end of the driveway. Because that is all we knew. But the highest rung of what's possible is far beyond the world you can see."

This quote struck me, not only because it's beautifully written, but also because it describes what I see as a universal truth. As cognitive individuals, both our understanding of the world and our perceived place in it start developing early on. Had I not, for extended periods of time as a child, shared space with people who did not look like me or live like me or think like me, I might too have reacted with fear and defensiveness when finally exposed to something different. In fact, I almost certainly would have reacted in exactly that way...

To return to my initial statement, I hope it's by now clear that my parents did not instill in my sister and me this inherent, necessary belief in equality through talking. At least, if they did, I have no memory of it, so I'm guessing it didn't work. *They did it by providing us with opportunities to see the world as both diverse and equal.*

It is very easy not to be racist when everyone in existence around you is white. But that is not the real world, nor is it one I—and hopefully you—want to imagine. With that being said, I enthusiastically support SB 1024, and I ask you to please take this necessary first step toward real progress.

I'll leave you with one more favorite quote from *Born a Crime*, in which Noah writes, "Because racism exists, and you have to pick a side. You can say that you don't pick sides, but eventually life will force you to pick a side." I believe this to be true, I trust this committee understands the implications of this reform, and I hope you will be courageous in leading Connecticut's charge to the side of morality.

Sincerely,

Willa Perlman