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March 14, 2021
via email to pdtestimony@cga.ct.gov

Senator Steven Cassano, Co-Chair
Rep. Cristin McCarthy Vahey, Co-Chair
Members of Connecticut General Assembly Planning & Development Committee
Legislative Office Building
300 Capitol Ave #5100
Hartford, CT 06106

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RE: Testimony in Favor of SB 1024, An Act Concerning Zoning Authority, Certain Design Guidelines, Qualifications Of Certain Land Use Officials And Certain Sewage Disposal Systems

Dear Chairman Cassano, Chairwoman McCarthy Vahey, Vice Chairman Needleman, Vice Chairwoman Goupil, Ranking Member Senator Hwang, Ranking Member Zullo, and Distinguished Members of the Connecticut General Assembly Joint Planning and Development Committee:

On behalf of the Connecticut Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, I am testifying in support of SB 1024. Thank you for the important discussion on this bill, and for allowing me to testify.

Our organization of nearly 300 professionals represents, educates, and advocates for the profession of landscape architecture in the state. Landscape architects are leaders in the development of built environments, stewardship of the natural environment, and protection of public health, safety, and welfare. We are committed to advancing just and equitable land use policies in Connecticut so that communities can make better land use decisions. Incumbent in this work is acknowledging the significant social, economic, and environmental harm that has already been caused by poor land use decisions.

Post-war patterns of suburban growth and urban renewal in Connecticut have resulted in a proliferation of single-family, residential neighborhoods and auto-centric commercial districts on increasingly marginalized timberlands, agricultural fields, and riparian areas. Such neighborhoods discourage walkability, bicycle infrastructure, safe streets, mass transit options, housing density, and mixed-use zoning conducive to economic and community growth. The recent departures of General Electric, Alexion Pharmaceuticals, and Aetna for Boston demonstrate that there is a real risk to job prospects if our state cannot provide enough housing diversity and opportunities for neighborhood quality of life.

SB 1024 begins to address this shortfall by empowering communities to increase housing density among existing structures as of-right uses, thereby preserving the familiar fabric of individual neighborhoods and streetscapes. Accessory dwelling units, in-law apartments, and multi-family conversions represent low cost,



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reasonable solutions to this problem, particularly in older urban centers and streetcar suburbs served by sewers and utility mains capable of meeting future demands. Furthermore, encouraging 2-4 units of of-right residential development within ½ mile of municipal Main Streets and central business districts puts housing in the heart of the community, preserving important timberland and agricultural fields for more appropriate uses.

Conducting public hearings are an essential part of the community discourse. This proposed legislation does not foreclose on the ability of residents to raise concerns on the merit of technical design standards or preservation of public health, safety, and welfare. Rather, it reduces the burden on homebuilders, business owners, and municipal officials to negotiate “planned development districts” as the only means to promote sensible and sustainable design choices. Having a set of widely-applicable, modern standards that do not require special exceptions will better allow developers to more easily provide diversity and density of housing options appropriate for the community.

Another laudable measure of this bill includes reduction of parking minimums to better meet actual observed demand. Providing enough parking spaces to meet municipal standards is a significant driver of development costs, and the resulting impervious surface area requires additional investment to maintain, mitigate urban heat island effects, and manage the stormwater runoff. Critical to this approach though is encouraging effective design strategies to incorporate “green infrastructure” strategies that will help stormwater with qualities and impacts. Allocating land areas to uses other than parking allows for more housing and commercial spaces to be built within the same footprint, resulting in greater tax revenue for municipalities.

Poor land use decisions in the development of housing, business, industry, energy, and transportation arise from an incomplete understanding of the complexity of these issues by local commissions. The proposed measures of SB 1024 to provide annual technical training for members of commissions, boards and agencies will empower municipalities to make better-informed decisions about how to encourage responsible development in their community.

As licensed professionals, landscape architects are equipped to understand relationships between the built and natural environment. Our current 20th-century system of zoning regulations is ill-equipped to address Connecticut’s challenges of meeting housing affordability mandates, creating a robust economic environment, and adapting to climate change threats.

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The proposals in SB 1024 will allow our state to build better communities. Land use reform will protect our environment, while encouraging our towns to grow and succeed equitably. For the many reasons detailed here, the Connecticut Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects strongly supports SB 1024. Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.

Very Truly Yours,

Matthew Verry, ASLA
President
ASLA Connecticut

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