



March 4, 2021

The Honorable Raymond A. Hull
Chairman
House Committee on Housing & Municipal Government

RE: H 5632– “An Act Relating to Towns and Cities – Zoning Ordinances”

Dear Chairman Hull and Committee Members:

On behalf of the more than 6,000 members of the Rhode Island Association of REALTORS® (RIAR), thank you for accepting testimony and affording our organization with the opportunity to comment on H 5632.

REALTORS® across Rhode Island appreciate the State's commitment over the last two years to improving access to homeownership and affordable housing. The foundation of our economy is housing. According to the National Association of REALTORS®, the real estate industry accounted for nearly \$12 billion or 18.2% of the gross state product in 2019.¹

At a time when soaring home prices are outpacing supply, the Rhode Island Association of REALTORS® (RIAR) is concerned that Rhode Island lacks a long-term vision to address housing needs at all levels. However, we are pleased to learn that the House of Representatives is considering robust measures to tackle the massive housing deficit that is leaving too many of our fellow neighbors behind. That is why RIAR strongly supports H 5632—An Act relating to Towns and Cities—Zoning Laws. By adding a “tiny homes” definition to local zoning ordinances, our state will be positioned to improve another housing tool that bolsters much-needed housing supply.

In the fall of 2020, RIAR conducted a poll to learn more about Rhode Islander's thoughts about housing in our State. The poll revealed that many Rhode Islanders think there is too little housing for residents with low incomes, young people, and seniors. And when asked about

¹ <https://www.nar.realtor/sites/default/files/documents/2019-state-economic-impact-of-real-estate-activity-ri-04-14-2020.pdf>

housing costs, Rhode Islanders overwhelmingly view housing affordability as a big problem in our State.

Tiny homes have been long considered an option to adding more affordable housing units in expensive communities, while keeping families united. Currently there are estimated 10,000 tiny homes in North America with 700 new homes built each year.² According to the Pew Research Center, a growing number of family units include multigenerational households. An upward trend in the 2016 census data shows that 20 percent of people or 64 million Americans are living in multigenerational households, up from 12 percent in 1980.³ Like you, our members have been devastated, witnessing the impacts of COVID-19 on seniors and their loved ones who have been prevented from sharing time during the pandemic. We have learned that a “tiny home” option could have been a practical and safe housing option for seniors instead of residing in a costly assisted living facility.

Incorporating a “tiny homes” strategy to combat homelessness, provide transitional housing, and support new opportunities for veterans, seniors and other vulnerable populations is exactly the commonsense policy that Rhode Island needs. H 5632 would require cities and towns to allow “tiny homes” as accessory dwelling units (ADU) and count the homes towards the municipality’s affordable housing stock. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the United States has a shortage of 7.4 million affordable and available housing units as of 2017.⁴ In Rhode Island, our State faces a shortage of more than 23,000 rental units deemed as affordable.⁵ As our cities and towns continue struggling to meet the requirements established by the Low and Moderate Income Housing Act (RIGL 45-53), RIAR believes that municipalities could adopt a progressive “tiny homes” measure that has the support of Rhode Islanders.

RIAR understands that there is not a single solution that will eradicate homelessness and housing insecurity. However, the first step in exploring a “tiny homes” option includes a discussion about public perception that small homes are not undesirable, low-quality housing. In fact, 66 percent of Rhode Islanders support changing zoning laws to allow the development of alternative housing options like carriage houses, garage apartments or tiny houses, according to our polling data.

² <https://emagazine.com/are-tiny-homes-environmentally-friendly/>

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-11/to-escape-covid-19-grandma-s-living-in-the-backyard>

⁴ Wright J.D., Rubin B.A. Is homelessness a housing problem? *Hous. Policy Debate*. 1991;2:937–956. doi: 10.1080/10511482.1991.9521078.

⁵ National Low Income Housing Coalition, “Housing Needs by State” webpage. <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/rhode-island>.

At present, Rhode Islanders are faced with few affordable housing options and will continue to rely on their government to meet the needs of cost-burdened residents. If Rhode Island is serious about housing reform and generating more opportunities, RIAR implores this committee and the House of Representatives to think strategically and begin by approving H 5632.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Salvatore". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "D".

David A. Salvatore
Government Affairs Director