



May 16, 2023

The Honorable Marvin Abney  
Chairman, House Committee on Finance  
Rhode Island State House

RE: **H5978**

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Housing Network of Rhode Island, our member agencies, and the low income Rhode Islanders we serve, we commend Representative Speakman and other bill sponsors on their leadership and prioritization of affordable housing as we seek to make our State a place where all Rhode Islanders have access to safe and decent homes that are affordable to them in the community of their choice.

During the last and the current legislative session, the growing need for more affordable housing in this state has taken center stage with policymakers. Historically low inventory of homes for sale and for rent coupled with exploding demand for housing have driven housing costs out of reach for many Rhode Islanders, particularly our lowest income households. Decades long reductions in building permit activity, restrictive land use policies, low vacancy rates, the state's chronic underinvestment in affordable housing and inadequate worker wages have all been major contributing factors to the lack of available homes and housing unaffordability.

**H5978** proposes a swath of structural and policy changes that would have a range of implications on the way affordable housing is developed in Rhode Island. At this point in the juncture, it is unclear what consequences, positive or negative, such changes would have on improving the production of housing. While we agree that bold and innovative action is needed to address our urgent housing crisis, we believe that any proposed changes to our housing sectors' infrastructure be done so thoughtfully and inclusively to ensure an outcome that is responsive to Rhode Island's unique opportunities and challenges.

There are three key components of this bill that I would like to draw the Committee's attention to:

- 1) I very much appreciate the inclusion of a Land Bank program and believe the State could play a pivotal role in acquiring key properties, which are then made available to developer partners via RFP for development/ redevelopment. As the state membership organization of Community Development Corporations and nonprofit developers, we believe the inclusion of these high quality housing developers should be included within the eligible developer pool.
- 2) The conveyance of benefits afforded to the State within the bill that reduce barriers to development, such as being able to go beyond local zoning restrictions, limited appeal options, etc. to the selected developer is an excellent component.

- 3) Lastly, I believe expanding the State's ability to acquire property and facilitate development through a public bidding process and authorizing tools that will reduce barriers to residential construction is more appropriate role for the Department of Housing/ State to play than being in the business of developing and owning residential property.

On behalf of the Housing Network of Rhode Island, I respectfully ask that **H5978** be held for further study to allow for more comprehensive vetting among the multiple stakeholders this legislation has the potential to impact. HNRI and our members stand ready to assist in this endeavor and look forward to participating in engagement efforts that support a housing system that works for the State of Rhode Island and our residents.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melina Lodge".

Melina Lodge  
Executive Director