TO: House Finance Committee, Rhode Island General Assembly

Date: April 14, 2026

RE: Written Testimony in Support of House Resolution H8316 (MAKING AN APPROPRIATION OF $150,000 TO THE MAIN STREET RHODE ISLAND PROGRAM)

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the RI House Finance Committee:

My name is Toby Ayers. I am a community psychologist, a retired nonprofit director and now a Fellow with Grow Smart's Main Street project.

I strongly urge your support of **$150,000 for Main Street RI in H8316**. This modest investment is a powerful way to boost our local economy and community health, in at least four ways.

1- Sparking Growth in RI. Last year, the State's initial support ignited a powerhouse network of 11 teams—85 local leaders and entrepreneurs in 10 municipalities. The teams work with national experts to solve real-world problems in their Main Street districts. We are ready to scale up and reach new towns, but without continued funding, this hard-earned momentum will hit a dead end.

This year, I've watched these local creator teams work. They are inspiring! They are the heart of this program. Their stories and plans for future growth are compelling and inspiring.

2-A Proven Model: The Main Street Model is the gold standard to bring life to town centers. My sister is a flower farmer in rural Georgia, which adopted the model in 1980 and has over 100 thriving districts. When I visit, I see the success firsthand. Rhode Island has the same potential. The national math is simple and compelling: **every $1 of public investment yields a $22 return**.

3-A Place for Connection and Health: As a psychologist, I know Main Streets are about more than shopping; they are the heart of our social life. We face an epidemic of loneliness, and these districts provide the "third places" we need for mental wellness. By giving us a place we can encounter neighbors and friends, and make new friends, Main Streets help us feel connected and less isolated.

4-Keeping Wealth in our Communities: Our village centers have long been engines of The American Dream. Many of us have family stories of entrepreneurs who created small businesses to pass down to their children. By revitalizing our Main Streets, we give today's small business owners the same chance to build a legacy and keep wealth right here in Rhode Island.

A state investment of $150,000 is a powerful catalyst that opens the door for much larger private spending and property investments. I respectfully urge the House Finance Committee to help us keep this momentum going and approve the **$150,000 appropriation for Main Street RI in FY 2027.**

Thank you for your leadership and consideration.

Sincerely,

Toby Ayers, PhD
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