

4/13/2026

House Finance Committee
Rhode Island General Assembly
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

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

FROM: Evelyn McKenney, Operations and Programs Associate, Grow Smart Rhode Island

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the Rhode Island House Finance Committee:

As Operations and Program Associate with Grow Smart RI committed to strengthening our state's downtowns and commercial districts, I write in strong support of continued state funding for Main Street Rhode Island, managed by Grow Smart RI in partnership with Main Street America. I urge the Committee to approve the \$150,000 appropriation in H8316 for FY 2027.

After graduating from Brown University in 2024, I chose to remain in Rhode Island because of the walkable, vibrant commercial districts that make this state worth living in. They are where I have built community, started my career, met neighbors, and felt that I belonged somewhere. I am not an anomaly. Young, educated people are choosing where to live based on exactly these qualities, and Rhode Island has them. The question is whether we invest in keeping them that way.

My office sits in downtown Providence, steps from other nonprofits and small businesses, where proximity makes collaboration feel natural. I live in Trinity Square, one of the main street districts represented by our RI Main Street Learning Cohort, and I frequent the restaurants, bars, and boutiques that give it its identity and build real social connection among residents. These two experiences, a vibrant downtown and a walkable neighborhood, are what Rhode Island's main streets make possible, and what makes a young professional choose to build a life here rather than somewhere else.

The people I work with through Main Street Rhode Island are making the same choice in communities across the state. In my role coordinating the RI Main Street Learning Cohort, eleven teams across ten municipalities, I have seen that the desire to invest in these places is not the barrier. The barrier is capacity. That is exactly what this program provides. Main Street Rhode Island connects local leaders to Main Street America's 46-year track record and its proven Four Point Approach, which organizes community-driven revitalization around economic vitality, design, promotion, and organization. No other program delivers this combination of national expertise and local accountability to Rhode Island communities at scale.

State investment in Main Street Rhode Island is not a subsidy. It is leverage. The Main Street America model carries a documented average return on investment of 22 to 1. As we near the end of Year 1 of the three-year pilot, the momentum communities have built is real and compounding, but it depends on a sustained state-level partnership with Main Street America that cannot exist without continued funding. **I respectfully urge the Committee to approve the \$150,000 appropriation in H8316 for FY 2027.**

Thank you for your consideration. I invite you to contact me should you have any questions or wish to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,

Evelyn McKenney

Operations and Programs Associate, Grow Smart Rhode Island

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