

DATE: April 14, 2026

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

RE: Written Testimony in Support of House Resolution H8316

FROM: Jacquelyn French - Wakefield Village Association, 2026 RI Main Street Learning Cohort

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

As a member of the **Wakefield Village Association** and the **2026 RI Main Street Learning Cohort**, 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. As a participant in the 2026 RI Main Street Learning Cohort, I urge the Committees to approve the **\$150,000 appropriation** enabled by **H8316**. This is one of the most cost-effective economic development investments the state can make.

Since its 2025 launch, Main Street RI has grown with remarkable speed. It currently convenes 11 teams across 10 Rhode Island cities and towns for a comprehensive 6-month training program based on the "Main Street Approach." Through this partnership, national experts provide the strategies and case studies necessary to replicate the economic and social success seen in thousands of communities nationwide. By uniting local government, neighborhood associations, and small business owners, we are learning how to build stronger commercial centers that attract investment and support our local economies.

My commitment to this work is personal. Growing up in Cumberland, I always wondered why many RI towns lacked the traditional "Main Streets" that I would see in the rest of New England - those quintessential villages with a town green, a local hardware store, and a coffee shop that brings people together. It wasn't until I moved to New York City after college that I truly experienced the beauty of a walkable neighborhood, where you know your local grocer, cobbler and dry cleaner because you walk past them every day.

Twenty years ago, I bought a house in Wakefield because I found that same connection. And I still remember the exact moment I was sold: driving down Main St. I knew I had found the little historical district with a vibrant Main St. that I had always dreamt about.

A thriving Main Street is a "virtuous circle"—when you capitalize on a street's unique identity, it becomes a destination. Families stroll, friends meet, and the entire neighborhood supports its local businesses. As the street grows, so does the local economy. And everyone benefits.

The Main Street America model delivers a documented average return on investment of **\$22 for every \$1 spent**, making this \$150,000 appropriation more than just a program budget. It's a catalyst for private spending, business development, and property reinvestment. And, as we near the end of year 1, Wakefield is already putting this to work. We're launching a strategic campaign to target the thousands

of families visiting for URI's graduation, inviting them to dine, shop, and experience our Main Street - operating under the proven theory that when you define your Main Street, you grow your economy.

As a cohort member, I know the training we receive through Main Street America is essential to our efforts to strengthen the Wakefield business district. Without continued funding, that access ends. The expertise and framework our community has been building would be cut off at a critical point in our development. I respectfully ask for your support of **H8316** to ensure our vital commercial centers continue to flourish.

Sincerely,

Jacquelyn French

Wakefield Village Association

2026 Main Street Learning Cohort