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House Judiciary Committee
One Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02903

RE: H5794

Dear Chair Craven and Members of the Committee,

I am generally in support of this Legislature's efforts in recent years to streamline development review procedures to spur additional housing construction throughout the state. Much of this work is based on national best-practices put forth by the American Planning Association (APA). State legislatures, like yourself, have utilized many of these tools to spur housing development to address the nation's housing crisis.

The State of Rhode Island is not an island; many of its issues are not fully within its control. (Even Block Island, where I am the town planner, is affected by the national housing crisis.) Rhode Island's housing crisis was decades in the making. People today want more space and they want their own space. We would need more housing units even if we weren't adding people. I was moved today by polling released today by Neighbors Welcome Rhode Island that housing is by far the #1 issue for Rhode Island voters (and homelessness is #3). Our population will shrink if we do not build more housing. We won't keep our second representative in Congress if we do not build a lot of housing fast.

A lot of really smart people are working very hard to ease housing development in the state. Our proposals are not perfect; each proposal, however, generally advances our cause: building the housing we need. I am a co-chair of the APA Rhode Island Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee and a member of the APA RI Legislation Committee. We worked very hard to introduce legislation this session to better streamline housing production. Some of those provisions are in this bill. No bill is perfect, but this bill uses best practices to advance desperately needed housing production. This bill does not change the responsibilities of municipal planning boards, whose primary role is to develop plans for a municipality.

I recently completed a housing plan for Newport that was adopted into its Comprehensive Plan. Newport downzoned during urban decay in the 1970s. Its population has decreased from a almost 50,000 in 1960 to under 25,000 today. Through the study, we discovered that Newport's low-hanging fruit is maximizing its existing building stock. Housing units should be able to be added within Rhode Island's existing buildings and neighborhoods to the maximum extent practicable. Doing so will protect our green spaces. We cannot let a vocal minority immune from the housing crisis prevent us from addressing it. Simply put, municipalities are not moving fast enough to solve the housing crisis and bills like this move the state forward in solving its most pressing crisis.

One narrow concern I wish to bring to the Committee's attention is that nearly \$1 million in funds about to be made available to municipalities from RIHousing for transit-oriented development (TOD) planning, with up to \$100,000 available per municipality. However, there are not currently enough municipalities eligible for the program to expend all of RIHousing's funds. While I disagree with the Housing Department's interpretation of § 45-24-77, the Legislature can easily resolve this issue by added "planned" before "regional mobility hub" (line 29) and "frequent transit stop" (line 30) on page 28 so that sufficient municipalities are eligible for the program to expend available funding.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Peter Friedrichs", with a stylized, flowing script.

Peter Friedrichs