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March 8, 2025

Chair Stephen Casey
House Municipal Government & Housing Committee
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: House Bill 5310 –**The Rhode Island Land Trust Council SUPPORTS the restructuring of the Rhode Island Housing & Conservation Trust Fund Act**

Dear Chairman Casey and Members of the Committee,

The RI Land Trust Council (the Council) is the state coalition of 50+ land trusts – mostly all-volunteer, community-based organizations formed to conserve the land and water resources that provide myriad benefits to our residents. **We believe that all Rhode Islanders deserve a safe, affordable, and healthy place to live with access to clean air, clean water, open spaces, and healthy food.** The Rhode Island Land Trust Council supports H5310, which will restructure the Rhode Island Housing & Conservation Trust Fund Act and assure appointments to the board. We thank Representative June Speakman for introducing this important legislation.

The Council recognizes that land use issues are complicated, and we firmly believe that we can conserve our important open spaces and forests, protect farmland, build all the housing that we need, improve transportation, and reach our renewable energy goals, if we work together. Over the last two years, the Council has regularly communicated with organizations dedicated to addressing the housing crisis to better understand how we can work together to achieve our mutual goals of conserving and protecting Rhode Island's important lands while also creating and sustaining affordable housing across Rhode Island. Through these conversations we have collectively recognized that reviving the Rhode Island Housing & Conservation Trust would be an important step in the process.

The RI Housing & Conservation Trust Fund (Title 42-113) was established by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1990 to address housing and conservation goals, and to improve economic vitality and quality of life for all Rhode Islanders. The law created a 9-member board of conservation and housing stakeholders, as well as a fund to address both conservation and housing projects, prioritizing projects that do both together. Unfortunately, the board was never appointed, and the fund was never funded.

The Housing & Conservation Trust Fund is based on a Vermont law that passed in 1987. The success of this law cannot be overstated. In the last 35+ years, the Vermont Conservation & Housing Board has produced 15,000 affordable homes, conserved a half million acres of land including nearly 800 family farms, and revitalized 80+ historic sites for commercial use.

In 2004, the General Assembly created a commission¹ that studied the potential contribution of land trust mechanisms to the development of low- and moderate-income housing, evaluated appropriate organizational structures and financing mechanisms for such land trusts in Rhode Island, and assessed

¹ Rhode Island Housing and Conservation Trust Study Commission. *The Rhode Island Housing and Conservation Trust Fund: A Sound Investment for Rhode Island's Future*. Report to the Governor of Rhode Island and Leadership of the General Assembly, April 5, 2006. <https://rilandtrusts.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PDF-of-full-reportfinal-Housing-and-Conservation-Trust-Fund-2006.pdf>.

the potential and viability of the housing and conservation trust fund. The commission report² determined that Rhode Island needs increased financial resources to meet both its land conservation and affordable housing production goals, and that increased state financial support is a key element and should include a dedicated funding stream. It also concluded that increased coordination between housing and conservation efforts would help both efforts to address both needs.

The goal of the updates to Title 42-113 through H5310 will make three basic improvements to the current law:

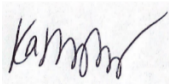
1. Increase the number of board members from 9 to 15 to ensure a better representation of Rhode Island's diverse communities, and seek the appointment of stakeholders from the affordable housing, land use planning, and conservation fields;
2. Create a designated account at the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank to receive and expend future funding opportunities, and include additional funding sources that the trust fund can access; and
3. Improve the allocation of how future funds can be spent between low- and moderate-income housing and land conservation projects to achieve our overarching goals.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation. Rhode Island needs increased financial resources to meet its land conservation and affordable housing production goals, and that increased state financial support is a key element and should include a dedicated funding stream. It also concluded that increased coordination between housing and conservation efforts would help both efforts to address both needs.

While this bill does not seek funding at this time, making appointments to the board would kick start the process of affordable housing and conservation organizations collaborating to achieve our mutual goals, and determining the best funding opportunities available to do so.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have regarding this important legislation, and urge your consideration on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Kate Sayles, Director, Rhode Island Land Trust Council

² "The Rhode Island Housing and Conservation Trust Fund: A Sound Investment for Rhode Island's Future" from the Rhode Island Housing and Conservation Trust Study Commission to the Governor of Rhode Island and Leadership of General Assembly, April 5, 2006.
<https://rilandtrusts.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PDF-of-full-reportfinal-Housing-and-Conservation-Trust-Fund-2006.pdf>