

The Village Common of Rhode Island

Aging Better Together

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT & HOUSING

The Honorable Stephen M. Casey, Chair

Testimony by H. Philip West Jr on March 20, 2025,

in support of 25-H 5798SubA by Rep. June Speakman, et. al.

ZONING ORDINANCES — ATTACHED SINGLE-FAMILY DWELLINGS

Thank you, Chairman Casey and members of the House Committee on Municipal Government & Housing for this hearing. **I testify in strong support for 25-H 5798SubA by Rep. June Speakman, legislation that would add new sections to RIGL 45-24-33 and 45-24-37 to allow attached single-family dwellings across Rhode Island.**

My name is H. Philip West, Jr., and I serve as a volunteer lobbyist on behalf of The Village Common of Rhode Island, a statewide non-profit that helps older adults live safely and independently in their homes. We coordinate volunteer services through locally organized and operated villages in Barrington, Burrillville, Cranston, Glocester, Middletown, Newport, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Providence, Warwick, and Westerly. We are currently helping form new local villages in Bristol-Warren, Exeter, Cumberland, and Jamestown. The Village Common now has 525 members and 355 volunteers. **Our volunteers save lives and money. Our motto is: “Aging Better Together.”**

We in the Village Common strongly support Rep. Speakman’s legislation to allow and encourage the construction of attached single-family homes.

In response to the nation’s severe housing shortage, many jurisdictions have recognized the wisdom of higher-density zoning for row-houses and townhouses.

Between the 1880s and the early 1930s entire blocks of common-wall brick homes were built in Brooklyn. These row-houses were attractive and secure, built within walking distance of shops and only a bus or subway ride from jobs in factories, offices, or on the waterfront.

During the early years of our marriage, my wife and I bought one of those two-family homes in a Brooklyn neighborhood called Sunset Park. We shared common walls with neighbors on both sides. We enjoyed a fenced backyard where our young children could play outside. We planted a garden and enjoyed meals on our back deck.

Fifty years later, we bought a condominium built in 2005 in Pawtucket. We again share common walls with neighbors on both sides and again enjoy meals on a pleasant back deck. Our unit has a single parking place, but we’re within easy walking distance of restaurants, a supermarket, shops, bus lines, and a walking path along Blackstone Boulevard.

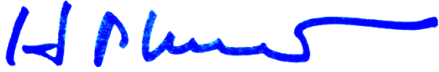
Between those eras of comfortable and affordable common-wall housing, detached homes on large lots became iconic in America. Suburban sprawl made families dependent on at least one car and vastly increased the need for cars — along with higher costs of roads, sewers, water, and utilities. Walkable communities became rare. Racial and economic segregation increased.

We in the Village Common grapple constantly with the isolation of older adults who sometimes feel trapped in single-family homes. Eventually, most need to stop driving, but detached homes in communities built for cars prove particularly difficult for them. Many find themselves unable to downsize and stay in communities they love. The negative effects of single-family, detached houses have been codified into zoning ordinances and reinforced through political resistance to any more densely populated alternatives.

Representative Speakman's 25-H 5798 provides a rational and pragmatic approach toward the creation of townhouses, rowhouses, and condominiums that will be less expensive to build and own than detached, single-family homes. 5798 will help communities evolve gradually toward higher density, greater affordability, and improved walkability.

On behalf of The Village Common, I urge the Committee on Municipal Government and Housing to recommend 5798 for passage by the full House. It's time for Rhode Island to encourage cities and towns to evolve beyond suburban sprawl.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "H. Philip West Jr.", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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