

Hillary Lima

President, Coventry Town Council
Chair, Coventry Municipal Fire Commission
31 Edward Street
Coventry, RI 02816

May 1, 2025

The Honorable Members of the
House Committee on Municipal Government & Housing
Rhode Island General Assembly
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chairman and Committee Members,

I write to you today as the President of the Coventry Town Council and Chair of the Coventry Municipal Fire Commission to respectfully urge you to **oppose House Bill 6249**.

This legislation is premature and threatens to disrupt a serious, ongoing process that is being led locally—with full transparency and input from all stakeholders—to address longstanding and well-documented challenges in the delivery of fire and EMS services in Coventry.

As many of you know, Coventry has struggled with a fragmented and unstable fire service model for more than two decades. While this model may have suited the needs of a 19th-century mill town, it has not served a 21st-century community of more than 36,000 residents spread across the largest landmass in the state. In recent years, these governance gaps have led to **repeated fiscal crises**, inconsistent service delivery, **Superior Court intervention**, and **costly state oversight**, including a Special Master process that cost Rhode Island taxpayers \$1.5 million.

Today, these problems are not just theoretical. Central Coventry Fire District—the largest of the four—is facing the **reduction of fire and rescue staffing by over 50%**, with one ambulance already shut down. Response times in rural western Coventry have exceeded 30 minutes, putting lives at risk. This is not acceptable.

In response to this untenable situation, the Town Council voted in 2024 to create the **Coventry Municipal Fire Commission**, a formal body tasked with evaluating the feasibility and implementation of a unified, municipal fire department. This Commission includes representatives from all four districts, the Town Council, administration, and both fire unions. It is operating under a formal resolution, subject to the Open Meetings Act, and is charged with delivering a recommendation to the Town Council by July 2025.

Let me be clear: **no decision has been made** about the future of fire services in Coventry. The Town Council has taken no vote. The Commission is conducting a thorough, public process to

inform whether and how a transition could happen. That is precisely why H6249 is misguided. It attempts to short-circuit a thoughtful, community-driven process that is already underway.

Further, the legal authority for the Town of Coventry to create a municipal fire department is **well-established in state law**. Under *P.L. 1948, Chapter 2147*, the Town Council has the authority to establish such a department by resolution. That statute also makes clear that, upon doing so, the fire districts lose their taxing authority for firefighting purposes. Coventry's Town Charter reinforces this authority, establishing the Council's responsibility for the safety and welfare of our residents.

Our community is growing—both residentially and commercially—and the demand for fire and rescue services is only increasing. At the same time, our current system is **collapsing under its own weight**. A 2023 independent assessment by Dynamix Consulting concluded that the status quo is unsustainable and that a municipal fire department is the most fiscally and operationally sound path forward. The analysis found that keeping the existing structure would “likely lead to insolvency for one or more districts,” and that unification would eliminate over **\$600,000 in duplicative administrative costs**—savings that could be reinvested to restore critical services.

House Bill 6249 doesn't address these problems. Instead, it attempts to codify and protect a broken system that has already failed our residents time and again. It would undermine the Town's legal authority, complicate transition planning, and stifle local problem-solving.

We are doing the hard work here in Coventry—together—to fix a decades-old problem. We are not acting recklessly or unilaterally. But we need time and space to complete our work. To pass H6249 now would be to abandon that effort and entrench the very dysfunction we are trying to solve.

For these reasons, I respectfully request that you oppose House Bill 6249 and stand with the Town of Coventry in support of local leadership, responsible governance, and public safety.

Sincerely,

Hillary Lima

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