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May 3, 2025

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

Re: House Bill 6283 –The RI Land Trust Council expresses concerns about activating the Burrillville Land Conservancy.

Dear Chair 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 significant benefits to our residents. I am writing today to express serious concerns regarding House Bill 6283. While the bill appears to make a simple name change from “Burrillville Land Trust” to “Burrillville Land Conservancy,” **it carries significant implications that would impact land conservation efforts in the Town of Burrillville.** What the bill does is activate a long defunct municipal land trust. This is not only duplicative, it undermines the important conservation work that is already underway by the town’s 501(c)3 non-profit land trust.

For some background: Municipal land trusts are all-volunteer land trusts that are affiliated with local city or town governments. These land trusts operate as advisory bodies to cities and towns, and their ability to conserve and steward important landscapes in those municipalities is directly related to the city or town council. Rhode Island is the only state in the country that has municipal land trusts. These 19 land trusts are hard at work ensuring that critical open spaces are protected and cared for, all for the benefit of the people who live in those cities and towns.

In 2000, the General Assembly passed legislation enabling the creation of a municipal land trust called the Burrillville Land Trust, but that entity has not been active for decades (if ever). At the same time, a private, 501(c)3 nonprofit organization named the Burrillville Land Trust was founded by dedicated local volunteers. This organization has been actively conserving land and educating the public for 25 years, bringing in nearly \$1 million in grant funding and in-kind services to the town, and earning recognition from the RI Department of Environmental Management, the Nature Conservancy, the Rhode Island Foundation, and many others.

The nonprofit Burrillville Land Trust is a model for what local conservation can and should be: community-based, volunteer-driven, fiscally responsible, and collaborative. Their work supports state and local conservation goals, educates thousands of residents, and enhances the quality of life in Burrillville — all without burdening taxpayers.

The Council is concerned that **H6283 is an attempt to activate a long-defunct municipal entity in a way that would create confusion, duplication, and even competition.** Rather than the town council supporting and enhancing the incredible work already being done by the nonprofit Burrillville Land Trust, the change would activate a dormant municipal land trust where one is not needed.

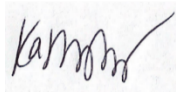
In addition:

- Municipal land trusts are not eligible for many federal programs for land acquisition or stewardship funds, which could limit the effectiveness of any new entity unless a local revenue source is established (such as a transfer tax) at the time of activation.
- Creating a municipal land trust without a governance structure independent of town politics undermines the integrity and long-term success of conservation efforts in Burrillville — a concern borne out by best practices from the other 19 Municipal land trusts in the state of Rhode Island, including Glocester and Foster.
- The current nonprofit land trust is already achieving what this new entity would aspire to — and doing so with a proven track record and strong public support.

The Council understands that towns may wish to revisit unused enabling legislation from time to time, but this bill raises concerns about the political motivations behind the timing and nature of this proposal. In recent months, the Burrillville Town Council has taken actions that appear aimed at discrediting and diminishing the work of the nonprofit Burrillville Land Trust, rather than supporting it. These include public criticism on social media, efforts to remove its property tax exemption, and now this proposal to activate a parallel entity.

We respectfully urge the General Assembly to hold the bill for further study. Rhode Island is a national leader in community-led land conservation — and the Burrillville Land Trust is part of that success. It deserves recognition, not duplication.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further and provide additional background or testimony. Thank you for your consideration and commitment to effective conservation policy.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Kate Sayles", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kate Sayles, Director, Rhode Island Land Trust Council