

May 19, 2026

Honorable Members of the House Committee on Municipal Government & Housing

82 Smith Street

Providence, RI 02903

Re: Written Testimony in Opposition to H 8546

Dear Chairman Casey and Members of the Committee,

As a resident and qualified voter in the Town of Scituate, I respectfully submit this testimony in opposition to House Bill 8546, legislation that would fundamentally change how residents participate in Scituate's Annual Financial Town Meeting.

While I understand the stated intention of the bill is to improve transparency and provide advance notice regarding major budget amendments, I am deeply concerned that this proposal would create unnecessary procedural barriers that could reduce meaningful public participation in one of the few remaining forms of direct democracy available to local taxpayers.

Under the proposed legislation, any motion increasing or decreasing an appropriation by \$10,000 or more would need to be submitted weeks in advance, along with signatures from at least ten qualified electors. Although this may appear reasonable on paper, in practice it risks limiting the ability of residents to respond in real time to information, debate, amendments, or concerns raised during the Financial Town Meeting itself.

Financial Town Meetings are intended to function as deliberative public forums. Residents attend specifically to hear discussion, ask questions, receive clarification, and make informed decisions collectively. Requiring motions to be filed in advance shifts the process away from responsive public deliberation and toward a more rigid procedural framework that may discourage participation from everyday residents who lack the time, organizational capacity, or familiarity with municipal processes to navigate additional requirements.

Research consistently shows that procedural complexity reduces civic participation, particularly among working families, caregivers, seniors, first-time participants, and residents with limited time or resources. Studies in public administration and civic engagement have long demonstrated that when governments increase procedural hurdles, participation rates decline and civic influence becomes concentrated among smaller groups with greater access to time, networks, and institutional knowledge.

Importantly, transparency and accessibility should not be viewed as competing values. Residents deserve advance access to budget information and clear communication from local government, but those goals can be achieved without restricting the public's ability to participate meaningfully during the meeting itself.

For many Scituate taxpayers, the Annual Financial Town Meeting represents the only direct opportunity they have each year to influence municipal spending decisions. Any proposal that potentially limits that participation deserves careful scrutiny. For the reasons listed within this written testimony, I respectfully urge the committee to oppose H 8546

Thank you for your time, consideration, and service to the residents of Rhode Island.

Respectfully submitted,

Shaina Smith

N. Scituate, RI 02857