



March 17, 2023

To: House Committee on State Government and Elections

Re: **H5779 – CRMC Hearing Officer**  
**H5966 – CRMC Staff Attorney**  
**H6034 – CRMC Reform**

Position: **SUPPORT**

Dear Chairperson Shanley and Honorable Members of the Committee,

Clean Water Action and its 20,000 Rhode Island members is proud to support H5779, H5966 and H6034.

Rhode Island's coastal resources are extremely important to the state, both ecologically and economically; and the mission and work of the Coastal Resources Management Council is critical to protecting our coastal resources and ensuring they are managed properly. This mission is even more critical in light of climate change and the related challenges being faced by our coastal communities. However, the Council – as currently structured – hinders this mission and work more than it helps, and it's time for the General Assembly to enact changes that will improve how Rhode Island's coastal resources are managed.

The CRMC's record over the past fifty years has been mixed. Its staff has elevated the agency as a national leader in coastal planning and management, but the agency's structure - involving a politically-appointed volunteer council with decision-making authority - invites political interference and conflicts of interest, hindering efficacy and eroding public trust. Frankly, the current Council structure is a vestige of the "know a guy" era of Rhode Island politics when state government was riddled with corruption and questionable ethics.

H5779 would ensure that the Council has the capacity to hear and adjudicate cases in a timely manner by empowering the Executive Director to hire a hearing officer if one has not been appointed by the Governor within 60 days. CRMC's hearing officer positions have often sat vacant for long periods of time, and it makes sense to empower the E.D. to appoint this position if needed, rather than waiting for the Governor to make the appointment

H5966 would create the position of staff attorney to represent CRMC staff on various matters, including at hearings. Unlike other state agencies, CRMC staff have not had their own in-house staff attorney, which is problematic for an agency that issues permits and other legally-binding decisions.

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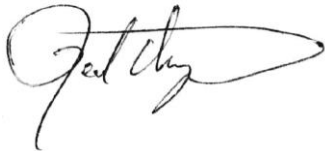
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The Council currently relies upon private attorneys who may have other clients (including clients with business before the Council) and potential conflicts of interest. This change would improve the integrity of – and the public’s trust and confidence in – CRMC decisions.

H6034 would abolish the current antiquated Council structure and create a state agency charged with carrying out the Council’s current mission. Council members are currently not required to have any expertise in coastal matters yet have the power to make decisions affecting the ecological health of our coastal areas. This power and responsibility should instead rest with the Executive Director (and their staff) who is accountable to the Governor.

Clean Water Action strongly supports these three bills, as they will ultimately result in more timely and ethical decisions by the council and improve the public’s trust in an agency whose mission and work are so important to Rhode Islanders.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jed Thorp". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jed Thorp  
Rhode Island State Director, Clean Water Action