

Heather Low

Written Testimony in Support of H7996

House Committee on State Government & Elections

April 8, 2026

Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Heather Low. I am a third-generation Rhode Islander, raised on the water, and deeply connected to our coastal communities. My grandfather was a Navy veteran, and like many Rhode Islanders, my family's identity, livelihood, and values are tied directly to Narragansett Bay.

I am writing in support of H7996 because, both personally and professionally, I have experienced first-hand failures of the current Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) structure.

Personal Experience: Lack of Transparency & Accountability

In November 2025 I applied for appointment to the CRMC. At the time of my application, I met the necessary qualifications for the position, including my background in environmental science and my direct involvement in Rhode Island's fishing and coastal communities.

Since then, I have followed up multiple times through appropriate channels. This past February, I had the opportunity to speak directly with the Governor in person regarding my application.

Despite these efforts, I have received no communication, no updates, and no transparency regarding the process.

The statutory deadline to appoint new council members—March 1, 2026—has now passed with no appointments made.

This is not just a personal frustration, but it is a clear example of a system that lacks accountability, responsiveness, and basic transparency in governance.

Pattern of Procedural Failures

My experience is not isolated. It reflects a broader pattern of systemic issues within the CRMC.

In a recent Superior Court ruling, the CRMC approved a modified aquaculture application without proper public notice or opportunity for comment, leading the court to vacate the decision.¹

The court found that the Council approved a “substantially” changed proposal without following required procedures—violating the rights of the public to participate.¹

In another case, a court struck down a CRMC decision as “clearly erroneous, in violation of statutory provisions... and affected by errors of law.”²

These decisions are not minor technicalities—they are fundamental breakdowns in legal process, governance, and public trust.

Quidnessett: Delays, Inconsistency, and Weak Enforcement

The ongoing situation involving the Quidnessett Country Club further illustrates these failures.

An illegal seawall was constructed without proper permits, triggering years of delays, litigation, and uncertainty.³

Even after enforcement actions were initiated, resolution has dragged on for years, raising serious concerns about the Council’s ability to enforce its own rules effectively.⁴

Critically, even state leadership has questioned why the Council would entertain retroactive relief for a “blatantly illegal action.”³

This case demonstrates inconsistency, lack of timely enforcement, and a process that invites confusion rather than clarity.

The Core Issue: Structure, Not Individuals

These are not isolated mistakes. They are symptoms of a structural problem:

- A politically appointed council
- Inconsistent application of rules
- Lack of clear accountability
- Repeated judicial reversals

Even when decisions are eventually corrected, they often come years too late, after costly delays for residents, businesses, and stakeholders.

Why H7996 Matters

H7996 represents an opportunity to:

- Establish a professional, accountable structure within DEM
- Ensure decisions are made by individuals with relevant expertise
- Restore public trust through transparency and consistency
- Create a system that follows its own rules the first time

Rhode Island deserves a coastal management system that is credible, efficient, and lawful.

Closing

As someone who has experienced this process—both as an applicant seeking to serve and as a Rhode Islander who depends on the integrity of our coastal governance, I urge you to support H7996.

We cannot continue with a system where:

- qualified applicants receive no response,
- appointments are delayed without explanation,
- decisions are overturned by the courts,
- and enforcement takes years to materialize.

Rhode Islanders deserve better.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Heather Low

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Footnotes

1. ecoRI News. (2024). *Superior Court reverses CRMC approval of Potter Pond aquaculture expansion*. <https://ecori.org/superior-court-reverses-crmc-approval-of-potter-pond-aquaculture-expansion/>
2. Save The Bay. (2025). *RI Superior Court vacates another CRMC Council decision*. <https://savebay.org/ri-superior-court-vacates-another-crmc-council-decision/>
3. Rhode Island Office of the Attorney General. (2024). *Attorney General Neronha renews call for CRMC reform following Quidnessett decision*. <https://riag.ri.gov/press-releases/attorney-general-neronha-renews-call-crmc-reform-following-quidnessett-decision>
4. Ocean State Media. (2024). *CRMC asks RI Superior Court to force Quidnessett Country Club to remove rock wall*. <https://www.oceanstatemedia.org/news-and-culture/climate-environment/crmc-asks-ri-superior-court-to-force-quidnessett-country-club-to-take-down-rock-wall>