

Subject: Support for H. 7996 – Urgent Need for Meaningful Reform of the CRMC

Dear Chairman Shanley and Members of the Committee,

I strongly support legislative efforts to reform the CRMC through H. 7996. This legislation will ensure greater transparency, accountability, and efficiency at the CRMC. I write to you as someone who has directly experienced the challenges of working with the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC).

My experience with CRMC during a proposed commercial aquaculture issue in Tiverton, highlights the agency's lack of clear communication, inconsistent application of regulations, and disregard for the concerns of local residents. The drawn-out process, lack of responsiveness, and unclear criteria for decision-making have not only frustrated those directly impacted but have also eroded public trust in the agency's ability to manage coastal resources effectively. Both objectors and applicants are often left confused and discouraged by the agency's opaque procedures and unpredictable outcomes.

For example, in June 2024, the General Assembly passed a new law to protect the waters of Sapowet Cove from commercial development. Yet a contested commercial aquaculture application which would now be against the law has not been dismissed by the CRMC. The application has remained unresolved with the CRMC's Hearing Officer for 18 months with no decision. There is no administrative accountability. The CRMC has no formal administrative rules requiring its Hearing Officer to make a timely decision. DEM already has such rules—this is a clear example of how folding CRMC into DEM would leverage an agency with more sophisticated administrative procedures, improving both accountability and efficiency.

H. 7996 offers comprehensive and structural reform. This bill addresses many of the concerns I experienced and provides critical opportunities to modernize and strengthen coastal resource management in our state:

1. Shifts CRMC operations into a division of the Department of Environmental Management (DEM), an agency that is better resourced and more capable of managing these responsibilities.
2. Eliminates the volunteer council and transfers authority with clear duties, responsibilities, and accountability to the DEM Director.
3. Enables DEM to merge overlapping functions with CRMC to create greater efficiency and reduce duplication.
4. Creates the potential to incorporate missing staff attorney functions within the existing DEM staff attorney structure.
5. Provides DEM with the ability to separate functions where there are embedded conflicts of interest in CRMC's current small staff size.
6. Establishes a structure for future integration to strengthen operations and provide a greater return on investment.

These reforms are essential to restoring public confidence and ensuring that Rhode Island's coastal management policies serve both environmental and community interests. As someone who has navigated the CRMC process firsthand, I can attest to the urgent need for these changes.

I commend the Rhode Island legislature for taking action on this important issue and urge your support for H. 7996. The residents of Rhode Island deserve a coastal management system that is fair, efficient, and accountable. Rhode Island needs meaningful CRMC reform and H. 7996 provides the most effective way to achieve that.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Mendez
Tiverton, RI

Cc: Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi, rep-shekarchi@rilegislature.gov
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