



January 19, 2023

Special Legislative Commission to Study the Entire Area of Land Use, Preservation, Development, Housing, Environment, and Regulation
Room 101, Rhode Island State House

Comments by Michael Roles, Policy Director, Climate Jobs Rhode Island

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the recommendations of this Commission.

Climate Jobs Rhode Island (CJRI) is a coalition of more than 30 environmental organizations, labor unions, and community organizations committed to working together to make Rhode Island a national leader in the development of a 21st century economy that is grounded in the principles of economic, environmental, racial, and social justice. As the state sets forth to meet the goals outlined in the 2021 Act on Climate, CJRI seeks to ensure that the goals are met through a Just Transition by expanding access to family-sustaining clean energy jobs for impacted and frontline communities.

One of the central priorities in our work moving forward is to assist and support the state and municipalities in reaching the Act on Climate goals. To that end, we support the Speaker and the work of the Land Use Commission in taking a critical look into how our land use and zoning policies impact our communities. In fact, we recognize that there are many meaningful ideas already coming from this Commission; and we thank you for dedicating your time and committing your expertise to delve into these very important topics.

Among the recommendations proposed to date, we especially support including elements of equity, climate change, and resiliency to our Comprehensive Planning processes. The Comprehensive Planning process is an opportunity for communities to set an action plan around critical issues and should weave equity, climate change, and resiliency planning throughout. For our kids and for the health and safety of future generations, the Act on Climate commits us to reaching a net zero economy by 2050. CJRI believes that the best way to reach those goals is through the principles of a Just Transition. From a planning perspective, this means that we leverage this rare opportunity to (1) lift families out of poverty by expanding access to family sustaining jobs through climate action, (2) ensure we create infrastructure that mitigates climate change and its impacts, (3) integrate principles of universal design so that everyone in our communities can access public assets, (4) while involving frontline communities at our decision-making tables.

The Act on Climate not only requires us to plan for climate change and integrate environmental justice in that planning – it also provides broad authority to decision makers in making those steps. There is already budding legal precedent for this. In the Rhode Island Superior Court’s decision to stay DPUC’s 2022 decision to approve the sale of the utility, Footnote #7 (page 13) states the following:

“Additionally, to the extent that the Division failed to adequately consider the environmental impacts of the Transaction in accordance with the 2021 Act on Climate, codified in §§ 42-6.2-1 et seq. (the Act), this provides Petitioner with an additional ground upon which to challenge the Division’s Order on the merits. Section 42-6.2-9 of the Act sets out specific decarbonization goals for the State, including a forty-five percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2030.

Importantly, §42-6.2-8 requires all state agencies, including quasi-public agencies, to conduct their regular business with achievement of these goals in mind. Thus, in accordance with the Act, the Division is required to consider the climate impacts of the Transaction, and to the extent the Division failed to do so provides Petitioner with yet another basis to challenge the Order on the merits.”

Additionally, on April 21st of last year, thanks in part to Director Brady, the Energy Facilities Siting Board ruled that the application of Sea 3 Providence, LLC must undergo a full review, citing the same grounds provided for by the Act on Climate.

Additionally, CJRI supports the review of land use and zoning enabling acts to promote housing development. We strongly urge that new housing units be designed to be net zero-ready. Almost a year ago, CJRI, in partnership with Cornell University, published a report, *Building a Just Transition for a Resilient Future*. Within the report, Cornell researchers identified that in order to move our state forward, we need 35,000 units of net-zero affordable housing by 2035. And in order to help lift people out of poverty, we need to do that work with prevailing wage jobs. I would be happy to share the report with the Commission.

The proposals put forward by the Land Use Commission to streamline and standardize the development review process supports our state’s ability to build the housing that we need. The housing and zoning proposals to allow for density along transit corridors support Transit Oriented Development, which would help meet both the housing needs of our communities while increasing access to, and encouraging the use of, public transportation. These ideas are in line with the recommendations from our report with Cornell and its broader goals.

Beyond the recommendations of the commission, CJRI advocates for energy efficiency, electrification, and renewable energy be incorporated into all future infrastructure projects. Additionally, clean energy infrastructure will require smart and careful planning to enhance the electricity grid. This will require important infrastructure like new substations, smart meters, and new transmission lines. We strongly urge that these kinds of infrastructure projects be constructed utilizing prevailing wages for workers, while including apprenticeship opportunities for communities that need them most.

The federal government has provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act. These two laws unlock billions of dollars to the states and relevant entities, so that we can effectively decarbonize our future and strengthen our economy with smart planning, effective infrastructure, and good jobs. This unprecedented windfall of money would enable our state to do many of the things that, up to this point, many of us have only been able to imagine doing. CJRI is committed to supporting the state and municipalities, so that Rhode Island remains competitive and doesn’t leave a dime on the table. On January 30th, CJRI, in partnership with the office of Senator Whitehouse and the League of Cities and Towns, will be cohosting an event for local officials and planners to learn more about some of the important upcoming funding opportunities provided by both laws.

CJRI supports and sincerely thanks the Land Use Commission and the Speaker for doing this important work. We eagerly offer ourselves as a resource to support any relevant work moving forward. Thank you.

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