

TO: Senator DiPalma, Chairman, Senate Finance Committee, Rhode Island General Assembly

DATE: April 29, 2026

RE: Written Testimony in Support of S2676 (Appropriation of \$150,000 for Main Street RI)

Dear Chairman DiPalma and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Toby Ayers. As a community psychologist and retired nonprofit director and now with **Grow Smart Rhode Island's Main Street Project**, I urge your support for **S2676**, the **\$150,000 appropriation** for our program's second year.

You've heard the national fiscal data: **a \$24 return for every \$1 invested**. But what fuels that economic engine is **Social Infrastructure**. As Main Street America works to revitalize commercial districts across the nation, it has found that social connection isn't a byproduct of success – it is a catalyst. Social bonds aren't merely 'nice to have' – **social connections are the foundation of successful Main Streets and a resilient economy**. There are four key reasons:

1-An Economic Insurance Policy. Social connection acts as a buffer during crises. [Following Vermont's 2023 floods](#), towns with [cohesive downtowns and a strong "Main Street" culture](#) recovered fastest. High levels of trust between neighbors and owners led to stores reopening earlier and helped wealth stay within the state. In such districts, residents don't just see a storefront; they see a neighbor worth protecting. (See Main St RI Roundtable: [Resilient Main Streets: VT](#))

2-More "Dwell Time". Walkable downtowns are part of RI's heritage. In [downtowns designed](#) with human-scaled streets and "third spaces" for people to gather, people stay longer. Consumer behavior studies show that **every extra 10 minutes** spent in a "socially hospitable" commercial setting [increases the likelihood](#) of secondary purchases. Social connection transforms a 5-minute errand into a 45-minute stay at a local café, shop or bookstore.

3-The Loneliness Epidemic. Social isolation is a public health crisis with a massive price tag. Walkable Main Streets can reduce the chronic stress of loneliness, which is linked to a [29% increase in the risk of heart disease and 26% increase in early death](#), risks as serious as from obesity or smoking. Building social connection is a common-sense way to reduce long-term healthcare costs for the state.

4- Retaining Wealth. Local businesses in active, connected Main Streets keep dollars in the community. Family businesses passed down as a legacy built our state, and continue in today's Main Streets. In our first year, our 11 Cohort cities and towns built incredible momentum. With continued funding, they can advance and we can expand this vital work to new municipalities.

I respectfully urge the Committee to approve the **\$150,000 appropriation for Main Street RI** to keep our communities connected and our economy resilient. Thank you for your leadership.

Sincerely,



Toby Ayers, PhD

Main Street Fellow, Grow Smart RI

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Citations:

Following Vermont's 2023 floods, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4835353/>

cohesive downtowns and a strong "Main Street" culture <https://hazards.colorado.edu/weather-ready-research/assessing-the-2023-floods-in-rural-vermont>

Resilient Main Streets: VT <https://growsmartri.org/resilient-main-streets/>

downtowns designed <https://blog.dormakaba.com/the-architecture-of-belonging-designing-cities-for-social-connection>

increases the likelihood <https://www.retailsensing.com/people-counting/retail-dwell-time-metric/#:~:text=Retail%20Dwell%20Time%20%2D%20the%20Route,a%201.3%25%20increase%20in%20sales.>

29% increase in the risk of heart disease and 26% increase in early death <https://blog.dormakaba.com/the-architecture-of-belonging-designing-cities-for-social-connection>