

**Testimony in Support of 7022 – The Act on Coasts – Coastal Resiliency and House Resolution 7731 - Creating a Legislative Study Commission on Climate Change Impact and Solutions**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES**

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Thank you for this public hearing and the opportunity to testify in support of H 7022 and HR 7731 – The Act on Coasts-Coastal Resiliency and House Resolution Creating a Legislative Study Commission on Climate Change Impact and Solutions.

After serving seven years in the Obama Administration as USEPA New England Regional Administrator I joined the Brown Faculty as a Professor of the Practice at the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society (IBES). During my time with IBES I wrote a book chapter on how climate change will impact the renewal of mid-sized southern New England cities and I contributed to the writing of the Providence Resilience Partnership Report, “Towards a Resilient Providence”. I am also the founding organizer of the Providence Resilience Partnership. These positions and this work afforded me the perspective and opportunity to seriously consider what climate change means for our ecological and social wellbeing. Now as a Senior Consultant with GZA GeoEnvironmental, I support resilience planning and other services that help communities prepare for climate change.

During the Last Legislative Session on March 7, I commented on H6056 – Act on Coasts. I asserted that *“More heat drawn from the ocean will intensify storms causing more deluge rainstorms. Deluge rainstorms are likely to be repeating disasters for urbanized communities. Our stormwater systems are not built for the volume of rain that will routinely fall”*. With historic flooding spanning across the year, 2023 did indeed turn out to be the year of the “deluge”.

For much of New England, the winter of 23/24 also turned out to be the season of extreme coastal storms. Raging winds and waves drove water over barriers and through eroded dunes and beaches. Widely reported last week, Salisbury, Massachusetts fought back by depositing tons of sand back on the beach the community lost in December. In one succeeding storm this winter the new sand was gone and so was the over \$500,000 spent on the project. Salisbury’s beach and homeowners are confronting the reality that coastal communities throughout New England are also confronting. The combination of sea level rise and more intense storm, fueled by a much warmer ocean, cannot be simply held back. **They must be adapted to.**

First Street Foundation's 2023 work on understanding flooding risk for housing provides insights about the scope of this challenge. First Street Foundation's climate risk model is now part of Zillow and other real estate apps. The Foundation used advanced statistical methods to show communicating flooding risks, through Zillow, is already impacting housing value and purchasing behavior.<sup>1</sup> The research suggests that the property tax system that most New England communities depend on for the revenue to sustain vital local services will likely be disrupted by growing flooding threats. For now, the relative devaluation of flood prone property is an emerging concern. But if the bubble bursts, the tax system that funds essential services will be disrupted before the storm hits.

The financial impact of climate change is already touching almost everyone. As we all are aware, the Federal Reserve is fighting inflation by keeping interest rates high. My son wants to buy a house to start a family - a very basic piece of the American dream. High mortgage interest rates are defeating that dream. Substantially contributing to inflation is the extraordinary increase in rates of homeowners insurance. Property losses over last several years are not consistent with historic data. Storms and wildfires linked to Climate change are disrupting the foundations of risk management essential to economic well-being. Food price inflation is also linked to climate change. So are health care costs. *Clearly climate change is not just an environmental concern.* It is a complex social and ecological concern that policy makers at all levels of government must understand and consider as they decide matters that affect the well-being of every American.

Over the last decade New England states, to a greater and lesser degree, launched and developed resilience programs which strive to understand emerging climate change threats and most importantly dive deeply into understanding most aspects of vulnerability. Modeled on the "climate ready planning" work Boston, Massachusetts built the most ambitious program in New England and maybe in the US. With completed vulnerability assessments and action plans, every city and town are taking steps to manage current and emerging climate risk. By building Resilient Massachusetts, a state program with substantial staffing, program policies and evaluation tools, the Commonwealth is crafting standards, improved risk assessment tools and performance measures that, if implemented, will hopefully sustain communities through most foreseeable climate conditions.

Using funding from Super Storm Sandy, the Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation (CIRCA) supported extensive coastal resilience planning in coastal Connecticut cities and towns. With a 2021 Executive Order and related legislation that increased state funding that builds on ten years of work by CIRCA, Connecticut elevated the strategic importance of resilience work. In 2023, state funding initiated similar rigorous planning work for inland communities. Like Massachusetts, Connecticut is accelerating its effort and moving to a "2.0" level of program development. Both states are seemingly committed to meeting the scale of the challenges as they emerge. But it remains to be seen whether cities and towns can create the agility necessary to change at the pace climate change is accelerating and increasing risk.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://firststreet.org/>

With smaller economies and state budgets, Maine, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire also recognized the need to build climate ready communities. Aligned with its large size and the limited capacity of rural communities, Maine’s “We Won’t Wait” climate strategy created a grant program that encourages communities to link with non-governmental organizations that know climate science and can use the many tools available to build sound resilience plans.

Rhode Island’s program is a limited facsimile of the Massachusetts framework *without* state funding for resilience planning or a substantial resilience program office. Instead, Rhode Island uses Federal Emergency Management Agency dollars and a partnership with The Nature Conservancy to provide facilitation support for one-day local workshops. Communities that complete the workshops are qualified to receive resilience project implementation grants from the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank. While certainly worthwhile, with limited analytical evaluation of threats and vulnerabilities the Rhode Island program falls substantially short of best practices in resilience planning implemented in Maine, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), also called Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) are providing unprecedented levels of federal funding for climate adaptation work that aligns with the federal commitment to environmental justice and other priorities. With large grant requests, the McKee Administration is counting on this support to increase the scope and scale of its programs. Of course, other states are too, and eventually federal funding will be limited if not exhausted. And that is assuming President Biden is reelected in November. A Trump election would likely lead to immediate cuts and program eliminations.

The provisions of the Act on Coasts and the formation of a Legislative Commission to consider climate change impact and solutions need to pass this year - for like Maine, Rhode Island cannot afford to wait another year to build a competitive program that supports rigorous assessment of threats, understanding of impacts and creates a strategy and planning capacity aligned with the scale of the challenge. **Not waiting also means sufficient funding in the state budget to implement all aspects of the program.**

The value of leadership is the most important lesson Rhode Island can learn from its neighbors. In her short time in office Governor Healy is pushing climate action forward declaring in her State of the State address that Massachusetts will strive to “climate proof” communities. An enthusiastic speech writer may have overstated what is possible, but the commitment to state leadership and action is clear. The commitment in Rhode Island must become be no less clear.

I urge you to demonstrate the commitment needed to ready Rhode Island for climate change. I urge you to pass H7022 Act on Coasts – Coastal Resiliency and HR7731 Creating a Legislative Study Commission on Climate Change Impact and Solutions.

Thank you for your public service.

Respectfully submitted,

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