

# The Village Common of Rhode Island

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*Aging Better Together*

## **HOUSE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY**

The Honorable Robert E. Craven, Sr., Chair

Testimony by H. Philip West, Jr., on March 18, 2025,

in support of 25-H 5794 by Rep. Robert Craven, et. al.

## **TECHNICAL AMENDMENTS TO ZONING ENABLING ACT AND SUBDIVISION ACT**

Thank you, Chair Craven and members of the House Judiciary Committee for this hearing. **Thank you for accepting this written testimony in strong support for 25-H 5794 by Chairman Craven, legislation that will clarify sections of the Zoning Enabling act and Subdivision Act.**

My name is H. Philip West, Jr., and I serve as a volunteer lobbyist on behalf of The Village Common of Rhode Island, a statewide non-profit that deploys a wide array of volunteer supports to help older adults live safely and independently in their homes. We coordinate crucial services through locally organized and operated villages that serve older adults in Barrington, Burrillville, Cranston, Glocester, Middletown, Newport, Pawtucket, Portsmouth, Providence, and Westerly. We are currently helping form new local villages in Bristol-Warren, Exeter, Cumberland, Jamestown, and Warwick. We also serve two groups that have often been isolated: (1) A Southside Providence Village has an active Spanish-speaking caregiver support group, and (2) A statewide community of aging LGBTQ+ members in a Pride Circle. All told, the Village Common now has 525 members and 355 volunteers. Our approach saves money and lives. Our motto is: "Aging Better Together."

**We in the Village Common support 25-H 5794, Rep. Craven's legislation because it will streamline and standardize the process for converting underutilized or vacant commercial buildings into viable residential projects. Many older adults are successfully downsizing from large homes where they have too much space into condominiums, often in converted mill buildings not far from their homes. This local downsizing brings dual benefits: it allows older adults to stay near communities where they already have roots, and it makes houses available for young families.**

**Rhode Island pioneered this process a half-century ago, creating an architectural style that has been widely copied. As this process evolves in a time of severe housing shortage, we celebrate the work of House leaders in recent years to improve the feasibility of such projects. We see an urgent need to streamline and standardize the approval of residential developments in historic but underutilized structures. Specifically, we affirm provisions that create density bonuses and build upon the Transit-Oriented Development Pilot Program.**

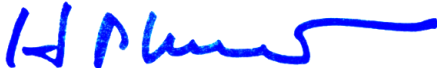
Many technical changes will simplify and speed this work. We specifically affirm 5794 that will:

- (1) on page 9/lines 27ff, refine requirements for minor and major subdivisions,
- (2) on page 10/lines 32ff and page 11/lines 9-10, clarify that an administrative review is solely to ensure that the application is technically complete,
- (3) on page 14/lines 9-17, remove late stage materials from the preliminary plan review,
- (4) on page 15/line 33 through page 16/line 6, place those requirements in the final approval process,
- (5) on page 16/line 28, extend the time for final approval from one to two years,

- (6) on page 17/lines 23-28, clarify authority of the municipal administrator to make administrative decisions,
- (7) on page 18/lines 3-5, strengthen the record of required findings with regard to conformity with the municipality's zoning ordinance,
- (8) on page 18/lines 13-17, clarify required findings in regard to physical address,
- (9) on page 18/lines 33-34 and page 19/lines 8-10 and 14-16, clarify the role of the superior court in resolving questions on appeal,
- (10) on page 21/lines 2 and 6-17, add "mills" to the categories of buildings to be renovated and strictly limit situations where "adaptive reuse" can be applied,
- (11) on page 21/lines 18-25, define conditions for low- and moderate-income units, depending on whether or not the municipality has achieved the required 10% of affordable homes,
- (12) on page 21/lines 26-34, establish clear requirements for the "building envelope" and reduce off-street parking requirements,
- (13) on page 22/lines 1-28, delete and replace specific requirements for setbacks, height, water and sewer connections,
- (14) on page 23/lines 9-21, clarify the ability of a municipality to restrict such conversions,
- (15) on page 24/lines 16-18, simplify the process of approving modifications for "reasonable enjoyment" of the project,
- (16) on page 25/lines 20-22, prevent municipalities from limiting the number of bedrooms in residential unit "to anything less than three (3) per dwelling unit for single-family units,"
- (17) on page 26/lines 8-11, clarify the relationship between development density where CRMC or DEM regulations apply,
- (18) on page 28/lines 5-9, clarify that developers seeking an exception from dimensional requirements shall not become a basis for denying the relief,
- (19) on page 28/line 24, allow developers, as well as municipalities, to apply for fund under RIGL 45-24-77, the Transit-Oriented Development Pilot Program,
- (20) on page 28/line 28, clarify that to be eligible for the Transit-Oriented Development Pilot Program, the development "must include developable land" within specific distances of transit stops.

**We in the Village Common welcome the conversion of vacant or underutilized structures into residential buildings. On behalf of the Village Common of Rhode Island, I urge the House Judiciary Committee to recommend Rep. Craven's 25-H 5794 for passage by the full House.**

Respectfully,



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