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March 18, 2023

Chairman Stephen Casey
House Municipal Government & Housing Committee
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: House Bill 7699- The RI Land Trust Council SUPPORTS the restructuring of the Rhode Island Housing & Conservation Trust Fund Act

Dear Chairman Casey & Members of the Committee:

The Rhode Island Land Trust Council (the Council) is a coalition of over 50 land trusts – mostly all-volunteer, community-based organizations formed to conserve the land and water resources that provide myriad benefits to our state’s residents. **We believe that all Rhode Islanders deserve a safe, affordable, and healthy place to live with access to clean air, clean water, open spaces, and healthy food.** The Rhode Island Land Trust Council **supports** H7699, which will restructure the Rhode Island Housing & Conservation Trust Fund Act and assure appointments to the board, and we thank Representative June Speakman for introducing this important bill.

The Council recognizes that land use is complicated, and we believe that we can conserve our state’s important landscapes and forests, protect farmland, build all the housing that we need, improve transportation, and reach our renewable energy goals, if we take the steps needed to work together. Over the last year, the Council began conversations with housing organizations to understand how we can best work on our mutual goals of conserving and protecting Rhode Island’s important landscapes while also creating and sustaining housing for low-and moderate-income households across Rhode Island. We recognized that reviving the Rhode Island Housing & Conservation Trust would be an important first step.

The RI Housing & Conservation Trust Fund (Title 42-113) is based on a Vermont law, and was established by Rhode Island in 1990 to address the dual goals of creating and sustaining low- and moderate-income housing for Rhode Islanders, and conserving and protecting Rhode Island’s most important natural areas. These goals are important to the economic vitality and quality of life for the state. The law created a 9-member board made up of conservation and housing stakeholders, as well as a fund to address both conservation and housing projects. Unfortunately, **the board was never appointed, and the fund was never funded.**

A 2005 study commission report¹ entitled, “The Rhode Island Housing and Conservation Trust Fund: A Sound Investment for Rhode Island’s Future,” came to two important conclusions. It determined that

¹ “The Rhode Island Housing and Conservation Trust Fund: A Sound Investment for Rhode Island’s Future” from the Rhode Island Housing and Conservation Trust Study Commission to the Governor of Rhode Island and Leadership of General Assembly, April 5, 2006.
<https://rilandtrusts.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PDF-of-full-reportfinal-Housing-and-Conservation-Trust-Fund-2006.pdf>

Rhode Island needs increased financial resources to meet its land conservation and affordable housing production goals, and that increased state financial support is a key element and should include a dedicated funding stream. It also concluded that increased coordination between housing and conservation efforts would help both efforts to address both needs.

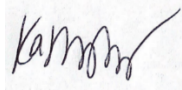
The goal of the updates to Title 42-113 through H7699 will make **three basic improvements** to the current law:

1. Increase the number of board members from 9 to 15 to ensure a better representation of Rhode Island's diverse communities, and seek the appointment of stakeholders from the affordable housing, land use planning, and conservation communities;
2. Create a designated account at the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank to receive and expend future funding, and include additional funding sources that the trust fund can access; and
3. Improve the allocation of how future funds can be spent between low- and moderate-income housing and land conservation projects to achieve our overarching goals.

While this bill does not seek funding at this time, making appointments to the board would kick start the process of affordable housing and conservation organizations collaborating to achieve our mutual goals, and determining the best funding opportunities available to do so.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have regarding this important legislation, and urge your consideration on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kate Sayles", is placed over a light gray rectangular background.

Kate Sayles, Director