



March 28, 2024

The Honorable Stephen M. Casey
Chairman Municipal Government and Housing Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith St
Providence RI, 02903

RE: Bill Number: 7981 AN ACT RELATING TO TOWNS AND CITIES -- ZONING ORDINANCES

Dear Chairman Casey and Honorable Members of the Municipal Government and Housing Committee:

I am writing to express our opposition to House Bill 7981, which seeks to allow, by right, residential uses in commercial zones across the state. While I understand the intention behind this legislation, I believe it presents significant concerns that could have detrimental effects on our municipalities and their local governance.

As it currently stands, existing law permits "households" in all zoning districts by right, yet residential use is prohibited in some municipalities within commercial zones. House Bill 7981 would effectively override these local regulations and mandate the allowance of residential use in commercial zones, with exceptions only for cases where public health and safety concerns arise.

One of the primary concerns voiced by our members is the potential elimination of commercial-only districts within the state. Such districts play a vital role in fostering economic development, supporting local businesses, and maintaining vibrant commercial corridors. Allowing residential uses in these areas could disrupt the balance of mixed-use development and have long-term impacts on local tax bases, property values, and community character.

While we appreciate the intent of the legislation to address housing shortages and promote mixed-use development, we believe that it undermines the principles of home rule and local management rights. Each municipality has unique needs, priorities, and visions for land use planning, and House Bill 7981 imposes a one-size-fits-all approach that may not be suitable or beneficial for all communities.

Furthermore, there are concerns about unintended consequences and potential conflicts with existing zoning regulations and comprehensive plans. The blanket allowance of residential uses in commercial zones could lead to zoning conflicts, legal disputes, and challenges in enforcement, creating uncertainty and instability in our local planning processes.

In conclusion, we urge you to reconsider House Bill 7981. We encourage a collaborative approach that respects the autonomy of municipalities, upholds home rule, and allows for tailored solutions that address housing needs while preserving the integrity of our commercial districts and local governance.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We remain committed to working together towards housing solutions that promote responsible and sustainable development while safeguarding the interests of our communities.

On behalf of the League of Cities and Towns thank you for allowing us the opportunity to express our views.

Sincerely,

David M. Bodah
Associate Director

Cc: Honorable Members of the Municipal Government and Housing Committee
Ernie Almonte, Executive Director, RILCT