

House Committee on Municipal Government & Housing

4/2/2025

RE: Testimony in Support of Bill No:

**5689 - An Act Relating to Towns and Cities – Low and Moderate Income Housing
(LC 11296/1)**

**5957 – An Act Relating to Towns and Cities – Low and Moderate Income Housing
(LC 1943/1)**

Dear Chairperson Casey and members of the House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing:

I am Susan Bucci from Scituate, RI House District 41, and I support the above-mentioned bills. I realize and respect that there is a need to create affordable housing in our state, but a one-size fits all approach, to enact and enforce uniform statewide Low to Moderate Income Housing laws is not feasible because Rhode Island communities widely vary in size, infrastructure, natural resources and population.

When I heard of a proposed 42-unit high-density development in my single-family neighborhood within the Scituate Reservoir watershed area, I immediately began to do some research about the watershed and the protection of the Scituate Reservoir.

Today, I will focus on the protection of drinking water for 60% of our state's residents and businesses, which is provided by the Scituate Reservoir and Providence Water. Here is a quote directly from the RI Department of Health's website – "Every time a water faucet is turned on and clean, safe drinking water is available, we experience the success of local, state, and national drinking water protection efforts. Ensuring that drinking water is clean and safe is one of the core functions of the Rhode Island Department of Health." According to Providence Water, they work to conserve the entire Scituate Reservoir watershed... The watershed is located primarily within the rural towns of Scituate, Foster, and Glocester, and includes parts of Cranston and Johnston. The total drainage area covers 92.8 square miles or nearly 60,000 acres.

Land use influences the water quality in the reservoir and private wells within the watershed. Maintaining forest cover and practicing and promoting wise stewardship helps to ensure cleaner water entering the reservoirs. Since Providence Water only owns about one third of the land in the watershed, it relies on local municipalities and private landowners as stewardship

partners. Protecting the source of the water supply saves ratepayers' money by reducing treatment costs, while providing many other benefits.

As stated in a report to the RI Department of Health from the University of Rhode Island Cooperative Extension in 2003, "As a result of proactive watershed management by the PWSB and low-density zoning adopted by Scituate, Foster, and Glocester, the Scituate Reservoir has one of the best protected watersheds in the state. As suburban development increases, threats to water quality from loss of protective forests, polluted runoff, fertilizers, and failing septic systems are also expected to increase. With 80 percent of the watershed land in private hands, actual impacts are highly uncertain and depend on how land owners manage their property."

In 1990 the Rhode Island State Planning Council adopted the Scituate Reservoir Watershed Management Plan stating that, "Water quality is strongly correlated with land use. ...As the intensity in density of land use increase, water quality contamination sources also increase." "This plan concluded that the primary challenges facing the Scituate Reservoir watershed are rapid growth and changing land use patterns. It stated recommendations to control existing pollution sources within the watershed, to strengthen the state's water quality protection programs; to continue local programs to prevent new sources of contamination through innovative land use planning... As part of this plan, the Scituate Reservoir Watershed Zoning Project was developed to assist the towns of Foster, Glocester and Scituate with the development and implementation of "flexible zoning" to achieve two mutually compatible goals: the preservation of rural character and the prevention of new pollution sources affecting water quality." As a result of the watershed management plan, the towns of Foster, Glocester, and Scituate had all adopted rural residential (3-4 acre min. lot size) zoning densities in most of the watershed.

The plan also noted that the Providence Water Supply Board's water purification plant was not designed to remove all potential contaminants. An upgrade of the purification plant to treat all potential contaminants would be cost prohibitive. It is more prudent to protect and maintain high-quality water than to depend on water treatment technologies.

To protect public drinking water, some recommendations noted in the plan are as follows:

- Municipal governments should exercise their zoning powers to establish a minimum size requirement of two acres per dwelling unit, as surface water will begin to show evidence of stormwater runoff contamination when development exceeds an average of one home for each two acres of land
- Municipal governments exercise, with some minor exceptions, exclusive control over land use within the watershed

- The town of Scituate should continue to require 120,000 square-foot lots to discourage any additional dense residential development
- In their comprehensive plans, the watershed communities should clearly reference the sensitive nature of the Scituate reservoir, watershed, and should establish appropriate land use goals, and policies to protect the reservoir from potential water quality impacts of a new development.

According to the National Academy of Sciences, “The relationship between watershed characteristics and water quality is grounded on basic, widely accepted concepts about movement of water and pollutants applicable to both surface stormwater flow and leaching to groundwater. These principles include that:

- Most water pollution comes from the way we use and develop land.
- Intensive land use activities are known to generate pollutants through accidental leaks and spills, septic system discharges, fertilizer leaching, or runoff from impervious areas.”

The RI Department of Health sites that, “Providence Water draws source water entirely from surface water and therefore the assessment of risk factors will follow the procedure for surface water supplies. The surface water supply reservoir risk factors include high intensity land use throughout the watershed or subwatershed” as the number 1 risk factor.”

In summary, the common theme from my research is that municipalities and private landowners must work together to protect the reservoir watershed areas, and that land use and density of development are the highest risk factors in controlling the pollution of drinking water. Taking away the authority of the planning and zoning boards in cities and towns will tie their hands from the ability to ensure that dense housing developments do not impact the quality of our drinking water. I do not think that any of your constituents would be in favor of any laws that could have a direct impact on having clean water for their health and well-being! I urge all of you to consider my research and testimony today, and vote in favor of the bills.

Thank you for your time, and for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Sincerely,

Susan Bucci, 6 Rutland House Road, North Scituate, RI / District 41