

Testimony of Charlie Baker, Executive Director
Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission

February 6, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment regarding H.823, Draft No. 1.6 on behalf of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC). This is a very important and positive bill in support of our regional plan and municipal plans. We formed a working group last summer to develop recommendations for improving the designation programs and are pleased to see many of those concepts in H.809 and this bill.

The CCRPC works with our municipalities and partners to plan for a healthy, inclusive, and prosperous region. This is the vision statement from our Chittenden County's Regional ECOS Plan adopted last year.

As one of eight key strategies, the ECOS Plan strives for 80% of new development to occur in areas planned for growth, which amounts to 15% of the land area of Chittenden County. In 2013, 86% or 508 new housing units, were constructed in areas planned for growth, exceeding the 80% goal for the second year in a row. Legislation like H.823 will help to further encourage this pattern of future planned development.

Our ECOS Plan also includes our Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). As part of this effort we conducted an employer survey about positive and negative aspects for job growth. The second most frequently cited barrier for employers trying to hire was the lack of affordable housing.

Most of our towns, villages, and cities have pursued and obtained one of the state designations. All of the designations have been used in our region.

In general, we are very appreciative and supportive of the excellent work of the Committee and supporting agencies to provide more regulatory process incentives for development in the right places.

Thank you for developing the notion of priority housing projects and providing more incentives for those projects in the designated locations. This should be a significant benefit to these housing projects.

1. Existing Settlement – The idea of developing a workable definition of existing settlements is a good one in that it will allow us to track over time development that is contributing to our communities. I am concerned that the definition focuses too much on the “centers” of our existing settlements (which seem like the downtowns and village centers) and may exclude significant parts of our existing settlements. I suggest that the definition (Page 8, line 14+) be made simpler and clearer by making the following edits:
 - i. substituting the term “development area” for “center”;
 - ii. revise lines 15 and 16 by replacing the current language with “contains both residential and employment uses” to better include employment zones; and,
 - iii. replace the “and” in line 19 with “or” (not all of these infrastructure elements always exist in each neighborhood).

The changes to the definitions of Rental Housing and Affordable Housing are positive and welcome. Thank you.

2. Priority Housing Project definition. Again, this is a great idea and welcome change to statute. I would request that “new town center” be added to list of appropriate locations for these projects (Page 11, line 19).
3. The Act 250 findings in lieu of a permit is a great idea. Thank you to those that developed the concept. This incentive should be extended to all of the designated centers, not just downtowns. Suggest substituting “designated center” for “downtown development district” (Page 15, line 8).
4. Please add relevant regional planning commissions to the list of recipients of the Board’s decision regarding Act 250 findings (Page 18, line 5).
5. The expansion of off-site mitigation for agricultural soils in these designated locations is a very positive step in the right direction. New town centers should be added to list of appropriate locations for the 1:1 ratio incentive (pages 20, 21, 23).

The provisions related to water and sewer connections are also positive and welcome. This incentive should be expanded to other designations beyond the downtowns.

One final thought for consideration is to have monitoring of the results of this legislation for the next three years. This will allow us to either celebrate the results or identify areas for further improvement.

Thank you for your consideration.

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