

## **SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING WORKSHOP- APRIL 14, 2025**

PRESENT: Calouro, Parella, Teixeira, Sweeney, and Ley

ALSO PRESENT: Assistant Town Solicitor, Amy Goins  
June S. Speakman, Representative District 68  
Susan R. Donovan, Representative District 69  
Walter S. Felag, Jr., Senator District 10  
Linda L. Ujifusa, Senator District 11  
Pamela J. Lauria, Senator District 32  
Diane Williamson, Director, Community Development  
Chuck Millard, Planning Board Chairman  
Anthony Murgo, Planning Board Vice Chairman  
Steven Katz, Planning Board Secretary  
Brian Clark, Planning Board Member  
Michael Sousa, Planning Board 1<sup>st</sup> Alternate  
Jessalyn Jarest, Planning Board 2<sup>nd</sup> Alternate

Absent: Steven Contente, Town Administrator

The Council met in special session on Wednesday, April 14 2025, in the Town Hall, Council Chambers, beginning at 7:27 PM, Council Chairman Calouro presiding:

1. Joint Workshop - Town Council, Planning Board & Local Legislators Re: Discussion of the 2025 Legislative Agenda  
\*Draft Update to the Housing Element of the Comprehensive Plan and the Affordable Housing Trust Fund

*It is hereby noted for the record that no action was taken on this agenda item.*

Council Chairman Calouro opened the meeting by thanking members of the General Assembly and the Planning Board to be part of the open discussion and dialogue of the priorities of the town for the 2025 Legislative Housing agenda.

Solicitor Goins provided an overview of four key legislative bills—House 5794A, House 5795, House 5799-A, and House 5801—and highlighted several concerns regarding their potential impact on local land use authority and development review procedures.

Solicitor Amy Goins provided an analysis of House Bill 5794A which proposes redefining a “major subdivision” by increasing the threshold from five to ten dwelling units and allowing unlimited lot subdivisions along existing public streets. These changes could result in more developments proceeding with only administrative approval, bypassing planning board review. Solicitor Goins also noted proposed modifications to the pre-application process, which would make such meetings optional rather than mandatory, limiting early-stage dialogue and the opportunity for community input. From a planning perspective,

## **SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING WORKSHOP- APRIL 14, 2025**

she emphasized that the proposed legislation shifts authority from local boards to administrative processes, undermining the ability to address community-specific development needs. Planning Board members echoed these concerns, citing reduced local control, weakened review capabilities, the risk of fragmented and inefficient development layouts (such as "hockey stick" lot configurations), and long-term impacts on community character and the planning board's professional role.

Legislators provided comments on House Bill 5794A, offering insight into the bill's intent and development process. Representative June Speakman explained that the legislation was drafted by the Speaker's policy staff as part of a broader state strategy to increase housing production, in response to Rhode Island's estimated shortage of 27,000 housing units. She acknowledged that the bill reduces local planning authority but emphasized the goal of easing zoning restrictions and facilitating more single-family development. Representative Speakman expressed a willingness to receive and consider specific feedback from local officials. Senator Pamela Lauria noted a lack of prior communication and encouraged municipalities to submit written testimony and specific language change recommendations. Senator Linda Ujifusa expressed surprise at the bill's development process and indicated that most senators prefer to be directly involved in drafting legislation. She voiced openness to local perspectives and underscored the importance of dialogue. While legislators acknowledged the bill's potential impact on local control, they reiterated the priority of streamlining development and increasing the state's housing supply.

Solicitor Goins provided an analysis of House Bill 5795, which proposes allowing property owners to reasonably rely on zoning opinions issued by municipal officials through zoning certificates. She highlighted concerns about potential liability, noting that if a local official were to issue an incorrect zoning opinion, the municipality could face legal and financial risk, including the possibility of being sued for damages. Planning Board members echoed these concerns, warning of increased legal exposure, the potential for overly cautious behavior from municipal staff, and a chilling effect on routine administrative guidance. Additional implementation challenges include the difficulty of ensuring absolute accuracy in zoning interpretations and the risk of unintended consequences in property development. Goins recommended mitigation strategies such as refining bill language and limiting municipal liability. Legislators acknowledged the bill's complexities and expressed openness to feedback, encouraging planning officials to submit specific language suggestions. Senators also recognized that the bill could significantly impact how zoning opinions are issued and might lead to more cautious administrative practices, potentially slowing down development approval processes.

## **SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING WORKSHOP- APRIL 14, 2025**

Solicitor Goins provided an overview of proposed legislation introducing a new category of "oversized lot subdivisions." Noting that the bill aims to streamline residential development by reducing survey requirements and allowing administrative approval of subdivisions, with lot confirmation permitted by a surveyor, engineer, or certified planner instead of requiring a full survey. Planning board members expressed concern about the technical implications, particularly the risk of inaccuracies in property boundary determinations due to the elimination of comprehensive surveys. There were additional concerns about the potential for inefficient or irregular lot configurations, such as "hockey stick" designs, as well as reduced oversight by planning boards. It was highlighted that the bill could enable developers to create multiple lots with minimal frontage, sell them administratively, and develop the remaining property under looser constraints. Planning board members raised concerns about reduced local control, diminished community-specific planning, and long-term impacts on land use efficiency. Legislators acknowledged these issues, noted the potential for unintended consequences, and expressed openness to refining the bill language. Technical challenges, such as reliance on GIS mapping, were identified as problematic due to the lack of precision. Planning board members recommended maintaining some level of professional planning oversight, ensuring accurate lot configurations, and preserving mechanisms for comprehensive community review. The discussion emphasized the need to balance efforts to facilitate housing development with the importance of maintaining thoughtful, community-sensitive planning standards.

Solicitor Goins provided an analysis of proposed changes to the Low and Moderate Income Housing Act, specifically modifications related to comprehensive permit applications. The legislation would reintroduce the Master Plan stage as an optional part of the review process and revise criteria for the approval and design of affordable housing units. Solicitor Goins noted that initial bill language appeared to allow affordable units to be as small as 25% of the size of market-rate units; however, Representative June clarified that the intended minimum size is 75%. The bill also includes provisions to require architectural consistency between affordable and market-rate units, including similar window patterns, material use, and design lines. Planning Board members expressed concerns about the potential for visually distinct affordable housing, which could lead to stigmatization or reduced neighborhood cohesion. They emphasized the importance of integrating affordable housing into communities through consistent design and scale; and echoed support for expanding housing options but cautioned that implementation must avoid unintended consequences such as visual segregation or inferior design standards. Legislators acknowledged the need for refinement and encouraged local officials to submit specific language recommendations and written testimony. The discussion reflected broader themes

## **SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING WORKSHOP- APRIL 14, 2025**

around balancing housing production with the preservation of community character and the critical role of thoughtful, locally informed planning in affordable housing development.

The Council discussed proposed legislative changes to the municipal tax levy cap, which would permit—but not mandate—municipalities to exceed the existing 4% cap in cases of sudden, significant development. Representative June Speakman explained that the bill, supported by the League of Cities and Towns, is intended to provide temporary financial flexibility in response to scenarios such as the construction of a large number of high-end homes, which may trigger immediate infrastructure needs, including additional school facilities, public safety equipment, or emergency services. The Bristol Town Council reaffirmed its opposition to increasing the cap and referenced a previously passed resolution maintaining its stance in support of preserving the 4% limit.

Discussions ensued regarding a common legislative assumption that the League of Cities and Towns and Planning Associations fully represent municipal perspectives. However, it was noted that these organizations are often understaffed and may not effectively convey the detailed concerns of individual communities. Senator Pamela Lauria emphasized that the Senate has not yet taken up the relevant bills, presenting an opportunity for municipalities to provide direct input. She encouraged local officials to submit written testimony, propose specific language changes, and attend Senate hearings when the bills are introduced. Legislators acknowledged that relying solely on statewide organizations may not adequately capture the nuanced views of local governments and expressed openness to receiving feedback directly from municipal representatives.

Vice Chairwoman Mary Parella expressed concern over the pace and volume of recent housing-related legislation, noting that multiple rounds of bills have been passed without a comprehensive assessment of their effectiveness. She recommended pausing the introduction of new legislation until the impact of existing measures can be evaluated. Vice Chairwoman Parella also highlighted, what she thought, a lack of support for small-scale property owners, such as “mom and pop” landlords, who face limited access to financial assistance and resources. She proposed the creation of low-interest loan programs, financial aid mechanisms, and technical guidance to help smaller property owners convert or develop housing units. Additionally, she emphasized the need to establish support infrastructure that enables smaller-scale housing development to succeed.

Representative June Speakman responded by reaffirming the urgency of Rhode Island’s housing shortage, noting that the state is currently estimated to be 27,000 housing units short. She acknowledged the challenges within existing development processes and the overall complexity of housing production.

## **SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING WORKSHOP- APRIL 14, 2025**

Speakman highlighted the high cost of development and Rhode Island's notably low building permit rates, which may discourage smaller developers. She suggested that some reluctance to build may stem from extensive regulatory requirements and noted that the Speaker's legislative agenda is focused on reducing these barriers to increase housing opportunities. In response to concerns about financial support for small landlords, Representative Speakman referenced existing low-interest loan programs for accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and indicated that efforts are underway to expand accessible development pathways.

Concerns were raised about the potential environmental impacts of proposed housing legislation and development trends. The Council and Planning Board members emphasized the need to consider stormwater management, green space preservation, and the cumulative effects of increased housing density on natural resources. It was noted that streamlined development processes, while beneficial for housing supply, may reduce opportunities for environmental review and mitigation. Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining environmental oversight in both administrative and planning board reviews to ensure long-term sustainability.

A discussion ensued regarding the state's focus on creating affordable rental units compared to promoting homeownership opportunities. Questions were raised about the balance of recent legislative efforts and whether sufficient emphasis has been placed on supporting ownership housing. It was noted that affordable rental apartments can help stabilize housing markets by reducing pressure on home prices and improving overall accessibility to homeownership. It was also highlighted that funding is available through the Department of Housing and community development corporations to support homeownership initiatives. A request was made for data detailing how many homeownership units have been developed since the enactment of recent housing legislation, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies in supporting long-term housing stability and equity.

Director Williamson highlighted the potential unintended consequences of state-level housing legislation on individual municipalities, emphasizing the complex and interconnected nature of housing and development policies. While she expressed support for the overall goal of providing sufficient housing, she cautioned that a one-size-fits-all approach may not account for the unique characteristics of each community and could result in unforeseen challenges, particularly for smaller municipalities that may be disproportionately affected by broad legislative mandates.

Chairman Calouro emphasized the critical importance of maintaining local control over zoning and planning decisions amid ongoing state-level housing legislation. He expressed

## **SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING WORKSHOP- APRIL 14, 2025**

concern about the limited influence local representatives have had in shaping these bills and called for increased communication and collaboration between municipal leaders, the planning board, and state legislators. Calouro stressed the need for timely, proactive feedback from local officials to ensure that proposed legislation accurately reflects the priorities and needs of individual communities. He advocated for a collaborative, balanced approach to policy development—one that advances housing goals while preserving the role of local governance.

### **2. Proclamation - Earth Day**

Sweeney/ Teixeira- Voted unanimously to adopt the Earth Day Proclamation.

The council thanked the members of the general assembly and planning board for their time and consideration in attending the workshop.

There being no further business, upon a motion by Vice Chairwoman Parella, seconded by Councilman Sweeney, and voted unanimously, the Chairman declared this meeting to be adjourned at 9:07 PM.

---

Melissa Cordeiro  
Council Clerk