

Prawer, Samuel

From: Prawer, Samuel
Sent: Wednesday, September 29, 2021 10:43 AM
To: 'Anthony Jackson'; Arata, Amy; Brawn, Kristin; 'Cheryl Golek'; 'Dan Brennan'; 'Dana Totman'; 'Erin Cooperrider'; Fecteau, Ryan; Gay, Jared; Pingree, Hannah; 'Heather Spalding'; Hickman, Craig; 'Jeff Levine'; 'John Napolitano'; 'Karen Lawlor'; 'Kate Dufour'; 'Madeline Hill'; 'Peter Merrill'; Pouliot, Matthew; Prawer, Samuel; 'Rep. Amy Arata'; Rochelo, Megan; Schneider, Deirdre; 'Sen. Matt Pouliot'; Zox, Izabella; Risler, Hillary
Subject: FW: email testimony

Good Morning Commission Members,

Please find below, testimony we recently received by email.

-Sam

From: Mary Jane West <mwest@mceddme.org>
Sent: Tuesday, September 28, 2021 5:27 PM
To: Prawer, Samuel <Samuel.Prawer@legislature.maine.gov>
Cc: west@tidewater.net
Subject: RE: Housing Commission Meeting - Thursday 9/30 @ 1:00pm

This message originates from outside the Maine Legislature.

Dear Commission Members and Other Interested Parties:

My name is Mary Jane West, I have lived in Maine for over 67 years (all my life so far) and worked over a long career as a local code enforcement officer, a local plumbing inspector and inspector of septic systems, as a planner, and in the housing fields. At present I am working on affordable housing issues with the MidCoast Economic Development District as a planner. I have spoken with local assessors, realtors, renters, builders, and many concerned citizens lately and I am very concerned about Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) buying up our housing stock for short term rentals. This is happening all over the State and the country. I presume it is because only the stock market and REITs are delivering a return for people's retirement accounts and investments. Even people who work for a short number of hours per year also get great tax benefits from investing in real estate. I do not see this changing until the Federal Reserve increases it's interest rates or the economy suffers another bubble of some kind.

Last year State legislation was proposed but temporarily delayed, that would have required every municipality to allow an additional dwelling unit wherever one dwelling unit was allowed. This would give REITs more benefits in buying up Maine's housing stock. Seeing how disruptive the short term rental market is to neighborhoods, I would strongly suggest that language be added that this would only be allowed for owner-occupied properties where the owner resided on the property for at least 3 consecutive months (a help to our "snowbirds"). This information should be recorded at least with the building permit as a condition. Short term rentals should always be recorded. The local fire department should be told where the dwelling is located especially if it is a movable structure or in a remote location. The septic system should be upgraded or added if necessary. The side and rear setbacks should not be lessened as people in short term rentals sometimes tend to party loudly and not care so much about the neighbors.

The Town of Rockport has allowed homeowners to rent out one or two bedrooms only (no added kitchen, living, etc.) for over 40 years, and that has worked very well while providing income for the owners.

I think zoning should greatly encourage clustering of homes in suburban and rural neighborhoods while protecting prime farm soils, existing farms, or other prime natural resources or public access areas. Typical suburban and rural zoning often requires one or more acres per lot, which protects wells from septic systems, which is highly important. Septic systems can be clustered fairly closely together as long as each septic field has enough separation in case of a failure of one, to make the particular owner responsible. Two to 10 acre lot requirements and large road frontage requirements do not protect farmland, and generally do the opposite. Deep front setbacks are only good because roads are generally built that encourage speeding, creating safety issues for children, pets and homeowners.

Our old downtown neighborhoods, like Belfast, have narrow streets and short block lengths with homes close to the street with on-street parking, where it is almost impossible to speed. Our rural areas had homes and village corners with buildings close to the street on narrower lots, but fast speeds have made them unsafe. Bicycling for children and others and walking is safer where drivers go more slowly. There is no need to have wide travel lanes that often encourage speeding for neighborhood streets and clustered developments as long as the needs of public safety vehicles and school buses are a top consideration. Narrow lots that might still allow some solar access and short front setbacks should be encouraged. Some parking on the street instead of all on individual lots could be considered. Safe travel for pedestrians and bicyclists with paths connecting to adjoining streets or other pathways encourages exercise, neighborliness, and lowers our carbon footprint. People sitting on their front stoop or porch close to a sidewalk or path, create a safe lookout area and sociability. Paths designed to include an esplanade/shade tree and storm drainage/snow storage area could be friendlier for the environment and for municipal budgets than a sidewalk with extensive curbing. Low lighting that safeguards pedestrians and bicyclists while protecting night sky viewing would be a benefit to the Maine way of Living. Our public rights-of-way used to be a connection among people not a place for cars and trucks to speed as fast as possible. Let's build and maintain them so that the Amish in their horse drawn buggies, and all our people don't need a big vehicle to feel safe. Arterials and State roads should be wide enough to allow commerce and safety at higher speeds. People are speeding everywhere partly because they can't afford to live close to their places of work anymore and they are spending too many precious hours driving. Village and neighborhood streets that are designed to get people to slow down will help everyone to build stronger communities. Narrower paved portions and wider grassed or dirt sections, or streets not slickly paved as often, naturally cause people to slow down.

Both South Dakota and Iowa have prison facilities that build single family affordable homes. South Dakota's program has built 3000 homes in the last 23 years. This is a win for all involved as these homes are generally for people with incomes around 70% of median income, the inmates that volunteer get valuable skills, and the construction industry has more candidates for jobs as carpenters, plumbers and electricians. If we did this in Maine, our lumber industry and window and door manufacturers could also benefit. This would provide energy efficient housing for the young families that Maine needs and for year-round seniors with lower fixed incomes requiring a smaller home.

Minimum dwelling unit sizes are unnecessary or should be minimal. Only life safety and health issues (such as potable water) are important.

Thank you for your consideration. I am available if you have any questions, ideas, or concerns.

Sincerely,
Mary Jane West

From: zoning.restrictions.study-ip-request@lists.legislature.maine.gov <zoning.restrictions.study-ip-request@lists.legislature.maine.gov> **On Behalf Of** Prawer, Samuel
Sent: Tuesday, September 28, 2021 1:43 PM
To: zoning.restrictions.study-ip@lists.legislature.maine.gov
Subject: [zoning.restrictions.study-ip] Housing Commission Meeting - Thursday 9/30 @ 1:00pm