

## THE BENEFITS OF TRANSIT-ORIENTED ZONING REFORM

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Chair Rahman, Chair Kavros DeGraw, Ranking Members Fazio and Zullo, and members of the Planning and Development Committee, thank you for allowing me to offer testimony on House Bill 6890. I am Charles Gardner, a research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. As an attorney with a background in Connecticut and New York law, I assist the Mercatus Center's Urbanity Project. In that capacity, I research and analyze land use and zoning laws in various states and cities across the country. I am also a resident of Newtown, Connecticut, where I serve on the Legislative Council. The views presented today are my own, however, and are not on behalf of the Legislative Council.

Today, I would like to make the following points:

1. Maximizing Connecticut's investment in mass transit requires adequate ridership levels, which are strongly correlated with density of housing near transit stations.
2. Allowing additional homes to be built in the vicinity of train stations has the potential not only to boost ridership but also to alleviate the current housing shortage in the state.

Connecticut has a long and proud legacy of rail transportation. Trains began running from New Haven to Hartford in 1838. One hundred and eighty-five years later, mass transit—whether in the form of trains, express buses, or local buses—continues to be a crucial means of mobility for countless Connecticut residents. Towns and cities throughout the state rely on these transit options, both for long-distance commuting and for local travel. Over the past decade, Connecticut has invested hundreds of millions of dollars on passenger rail service from New Haven to Springfield, Massachusetts, as well as on the CTfastrak regional bus rapid transit system from Hartford to New Britain.

Although both projects were touted as means of creating jobs, mitigating traffic congestion, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, these benefits depend on a robust level of ridership. Ridership, in turn, strongly depends on the density of homes and jobs around transit stops. Recent research finds that transit ridership gains as housing density close to transit rises to around 30 units per acre. By contrast, where population densities are very low, residents are much more likely to rely on automobiles for transportation, undermining the benefits of transit investment.

Despite the significant spending by Connecticut to improve and expand transportation options in recent years, many towns and cities across the state enforce low-density zoning in the immediate

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vicinity of train or bus stations, in some cases requiring minimum lot sizes of as much as an acre in locations where city sewer and water is available or could be made available without extravagant expense. This undermines Connecticut's own transportation objectives and decreases the value the state derives from every taxpayer dollar that is spent on transit. Even where very low densities are not mandated, allowable densities often fall far below the level that would help maximize transit ridership and provide options for people wishing to use transit for their transportation needs.

Granting residents the right to build more densely on their own properties can boost ridership, among other benefits, at minimal cost to the state or localities. To the extent that these changes require additional investments in infrastructure, a state can and should assist towns and cities with those investments. Additionally, with the state in the midst of a housing shortage, removing artificial barriers to new housing construction would benefit all Connecticut residents by expanding the range of housing options.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mass transit is a statewide concern in Connecticut, involving statewide transportation objectives, serving a statewide ridership, and funded through state budgets. State policymakers therefore have an important role to play in ensuring that each taxpayer dollar invested in Connecticut's trains and buses provides the highest possible return to their constituents. Local governments have the authority to regulate housing density based on their power to protect health, safety, and the public welfare. But when this authority is employed in a manner that interferes with state's goals for lessening traffic congestion, improving mobility, reducing pollution, and expanding access to employment, lawmakers have the responsibility to consider interventions tailored to advancing these objectives.