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## POLICY SPOTLIGHT

# Streamline Housing Permitting in Connecticut

Reforming environmental rules and vague statutes to unlock more housing

CHARLES GARDNER | JANUARY 2026

**W**hen builders and developers face delays and uncertainty in planning, permitting, and new housing construction, they pass on the costs to the end user. Delays and uncertainty can even dissuade developers from initiating projects entirely. The result is decreased competition and increased prices for all homes, not just new ones. Data on housing starts and completions suggest that the build times in the Northeast have doubled since the early 2000s, from about 10 months to about 20, and the permitting process for housing plays a major role in that.<sup>1</sup>

Connecticut is a prime example of a state with zoning laws that curtail growth. Even where housing is allowed, local procedures make obtaining housing approval a lengthy, adversarial, and uncertain process. Projects that secure approval can still face legal challenges, which—even if dismissed—often take over a year to resolve. The mere threat of litigation deters developers. Most delays and uncertainty identified in this brief arise from state laws that only state lawmakers can fix.

Based on conversations with land use experts across Connecticut, this policy brief recommends streamlining four areas of state law to reduce the delays and uncertainty that drive up rents and home prices:

### **1. Reform the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act (IWWA) to Restore Balance**

To address the statute's imbalances that have tilted the playing field against economic development without clear environmental benefits, I propose the following reforms:

- Mandate training for all inland wetlands agency members.

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Gardner, "How to Streamline Housing Permitting in Connecticut" (Mercatus Policy Brief, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, January 16, 2024). Scan the QR code below for the full analysis, including sources.



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*The ideas presented in this document do not represent official positions of the Mercatus Center or George Mason University.*

- Narrow the statutory right to challenge the decisions of inland wetlands agencies and commissions to those alleging particularized injury to person or property.
- Prioritize IWWA matters and schedule court hearings promptly after the return date.
- Permit municipal exemptions from IWWA review in appropriate areas in its plan of conservation and development.

## **2. Simplify the Special Permitting Process**

Semi-discretionary approvals such as conditional use permits and special exceptions should be used on a limited basis with towns defining clear approval criteria instead of using procedures suited to zoning amendments. Municipalities can audit their own zoning codes to reduce the use of conditional use permits and special exceptions, while the state could enact the following reforms:

- Require clear and objective criteria for semi-discretionary approvals.
- Eliminate public hearing requirements for such approvals under Connecticut General Statutes § 8-3c.
- Establish clear and enforceable consequences for town commissions or boards that fail to act on semi-discretionary approvals within the time prescribed by Connecticut General Statutes § 8-7d.

## **3. Align Zoning Power with Broader Community Priorities**

The current scheme for regulating zoning prioritizes small groups of dissenters over the interests of the community at large. The following recommendations are proposed:

- Amend Connecticut's zoning enabling statute to allow a municipality to designate its principal legislative body as the zoning commission.
- Narrow the statutory right to challenge zoning decisions to those who can allege particularized injury to person or property.
- Establish clear and enforceable consequences for town commissions or boards that fail to act on applications for rezoning within the time prescribed by Connecticut General Statutes § 8-7d.

## **4. Strengthen the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) as a Planning and Policy-Making Tool**

The municipal housing growth plans prescribed by House Bill 8002 require the inclusion of certain information, but an added emphasis on data could also make the POCD a more useful planning document. Merging the housing growth plan and the POCD should be considered, but in the interim added requirements for the POCD should include the following:

- Zoning capacity analysis estimating total allowable dwelling units under the current zoning.
- Computation of the percentage of land zoned for each use.
- Comparison with prior plans for zoning capacity and use analysis.
- A map of nonconforming properties and their share of total parcels.
- Wastewater treatment capacity disclosure, including capacity of municipal or external facilities.
- The identification of the general location and extent of areas served by public water.

For Connecticut's citizens and towns, the red tape around land use is a persistent problem. To enable predictable growth with more competition between developers, the state should work on streamlining development processes.