

Empowering Religious Organizations to Address Connecticut's Housing Shortage

CHARLES GARDNER

Senior Research Fellow, Mercatus Center at George Mason University

Connecticut House Committee on Planning and Development
Hearing on House Bill 5396, "An act concerning affordable housing development on certain land owned by a religious organization"

March 4, 2026

Co-chairs Rahman and Kavros DeGraw, Vice Chairs Chafee and Needleman, and members of the Committee on Planning and Development, thank you for allowing me to offer informational testimony relating to House Bill 5396, titled "An act concerning affordable housing development on certain land owned by a religious organization." I am Charles Gardner, a senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. I study housing policy across the country and, as part of my research, have recommended reforms to land use laws like those proposed in this bill as one way to generate needed housing.

Empowering religious organizations to build housing on land they own has enjoyed widespread and growing recognition over the past several years. With a nationwide housing crisis driving up rents and home prices across the board, the heaviest cost burdens have fallen on people with limited incomes. In response, religious organizations and other nonprofits have recognized that they could use portions of their tax-exempt land to help meet the need for lower-cost housing in a manner consistent with their values and missions.¹

In 2025, bills allowing religious, educational, and nonprofit organizations to build homes on their land were introduced in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.² In California and Florida, these bills were signed into law.³ During the current legislative session, in addition to the bill under consideration, so-called YIGBY (Yes In God's Backyard) bills have been introduced in

¹ Eli Kahn and Salim Furth, "Office Overhauls and 'God's Backyard'": Reforms for Housing in Commercial Zones and Faith Land" (Mercatus Policy Brief, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, May 1, 2024).

² Eli Kahn and Salim Furth, "Framing Futures: Pro-Housing Legislation Goes Vertical in 2025" (Mercatus Policy Brief, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, July 2025).

³ See California A.B. 130 (2025) and Florida S.B. 1730 (2025), as enacted.

Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington—a wide range of states that reflects the scope and urgency of the housing shortage, the broad political appeal of housing reforms, and the effective advocacy of religious organizations on housing matters.⁴

While bills involving deed-restricted or subsidized housing are often susceptible to being lengthy and complex, the provisions of House Bill 5396 are clear and concise. The bill prescribes streamlined procedures for approval and provides a generous allowance for residential density while recognizing genuine health, safety, and environmental concerns as well as the necessity for access to water and sewer infrastructure. The bill also prescribes a significant set-aside for developments that goes beyond the requirements contained in Connecticut’s affordable-housing land use appeals statute.⁵ Given the substantial amount of land owned by religious organizations across all of Connecticut, much of which currently sits underutilized but in the hands of organizations motivated to help the communities they serve, the reforms proposed in this bill would be another step forward in addressing the state’s housing crisis.

⁴ See Colorado HB26-1001 (2026), Idaho S.1278 (2026), Illinois H.B.5083/S.B.3187 (2026), Indiana S.B.0205 (2026), Massachusetts H.2347/S.1430 (2026), New York A.3647B/S.3397B (2026), Oklahoma S.B.1545 (2026), Rhode Island H.B.7445/S.B.2268 (2026), Virginia H.B. 1279/S.B. 388 (2026), Washington S.B. 5885 (2026).

⁵ See Conn. Gen. Stat. § 8-30g(6).