

The Day Guest Opinions

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A seat at the table for everyone

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In Connecticut, we often take pride in “local control.” We cherish our town halls, commissions and the volunteers who step up to serve their communities. But when it comes to decisions about how land is used — what kinds of homes we can build, where families can live and who has access to opportunity — we need to take a hard look at who actually holds the power.

Local land use boards, like Planning & Zoning Commissions and Zoning Boards of Appeal, determine whether new housing gets built, whether that housing is affordable and what kind of community we become. This system is intended to ensure land use decisions reflect the needs of all residents.

In New London County, 97% of board members are white, while just 73% of county residents are. Nearly three-quarters of those are men, but more than 52% of the population is female. The median age is 63, compared to 41 for the broader population. And while 30% of residents are renters, 92% of board members own their homes. These findings, pulled from demographic data collected by the Centers for Housing Opportunity in Fairfield County and Eastern Connecticut and published in a new report, **Room at the Table**, reveal that our local land use boards do not accurately reflect the communities they serve.

Across Connecticut — and especially here in Eastern Connecticut — housing reforms face delay or opposition amid political inaction. Proposals to allow duplexes or townhomes or

make housing more affordable are often tabled or watered down, with little meaningful public input. The result is exclusionary zoning that locks people out of our towns and stifles opportunity.

Some say, “That’s local control.” But we ask: *Control by whom?* When renters, shift workers, caregivers and newer residents can’t access decision-making spaces, we’re not honoring democracy — we’re reinforcing exclusion.

This isn’t just about fairness. It’s about real consequences. When land use boards lack a range of lived experiences, it becomes harder to approve the housing Eastern Connecticut desperately needs: homes for families, seniors, essential workers and those earning under \$60,000 a year. Instead, we keep restrictive zoning that drives up costs and pushes out the very people who keep our communities running — teachers, tradespeople, childcare providers and small business workers.

When those most impacted by the housing crisis aren’t at the table, the table tilts toward those with the most privilege — and the least urgency for change.

The Room at the Table report also found that 10% of land use board seats are vacant, and another 10% are held by people serving expired terms. That’s a problem, but also an opportunity.

Municipalities must do more to make these civic roles accessible. That means they need to clearly advertise vacancies, remove barriers like a lack of childcare or inflexible meeting times, and offer stipends and hybrid options. It also means providing training and mentorship — especially for those who’ve never been invited to serve — and actively recruiting renters, younger residents and people of color to participate.

Put simply, here’s what towns should do now:

Conduct inclusive outreach to fill land use board vacancies.

Offer training, stipends and hybrid meetings to reduce barriers.

Clearly post role descriptions and transparent appointment processes.

But the responsibility doesn’t fall on town halls alone.

Local political parties play a critical role in determining who holds power. They decide who gets nominated, who appears on ballots and who is recommended for appointment. If party leaders aren't actively recruiting new voices — especially renters, people of color and younger residents — they're reinforcing exclusion.

To our local party committees:

Stop recycling the same names and networks.

Create open, transparent ways for people to express interest.

Invest in outreach and support for new, underrepresented leaders.

If party leaders fail to act, they are not protecting local democracy — they are obstructing it.

To residents of Eastern Connecticut: if you care about housing, fairness and your town's future, this is your moment. There are seats to fill. Run. Apply. Show up. Speak up. Push your town, your local party and your neighbors to build a more inclusive process.

Because local control should mean *shared* control — and a seat at the table for all of us.

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