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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 21-H 6180, AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- OPEN MEETINGS April 12, 2021

The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this legislation, which would allow residents to comment at public meetings on agenda items that have been postponed or withdrawn.

The Open Meetings Act, while generally requiring meetings of public bodies to be held in the open, presently contains no requirement for members of the public to *participate* in those meetings by offering public comment. While many public bodies do allow public comment periods at their meetings – whether by policy, rule, ordinance or charter provision – that participation can be severely restricted. The ACLU therefore supports efforts to allow reasonable opportunities for public involvement in meetings, and this bill addresses one particular aspect of that participation.

Specifically, we believe that there is no compelling reason why a member of the public should be prevented from speaking on a matter simply because the public body has decided to remove it from the agenda. Members of the body could benefit from hearing those public comments, as it may help them decide whether to restore the agenda item to a future meeting or revise it in the meantime based on the feedback that has been provided at the public forum.

For these reasons, the ACLU supports this legislation.

Submitted by: Steven Brown, Executive Director