

Regional Plan Association Testimony for the 2026 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on**Environmental Conservation and Energy****January 28, 2026**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Joshua Berman, and I am the Campaigns Manager speaking for Regional Plan Association, an independent, nonprofit urban planning organization that has worked for more than a century to improve the economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and quality of life of the New York metropolitan region.

As the Legislature reconvenes and enters budget negotiations, New Yorkers are confronting a convergence of urgent challenges: a severe housing affordability crisis, rising utility costs, aging infrastructure, and the accelerating impacts of climate change. New York State has both the responsibility and the opportunity to lead and deliver real, measurable results that improve people's lives while strengthening environmental protections and advancing our climate goals.

For these reasons, RPA strongly supports Governor Hochul's proposed modernization of the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) included in the FY27 Executive Budget which would:

- Provide Type II exemptions for housing developments and other community facilities on previously disturbed land and;
- Establish a two-year maximum deadline for completion of a SEQRA environmental impact statement after a project receives a positive declaration.

SEQRA was enacted more than 50 years ago, in a very different economic, environmental, and demographic context. While its core purpose, ensuring that environmental impacts are considered in government decision-making, remains critical, the law has not been meaningfully updated to reflect two of the most pressing challenges facing New York today: climate change and housing affordability.

In practice, SEQRA is too often used to delay, block, or abandon exactly the kinds of projects New York urgently needs: infill housing near jobs and transit, affordable senior housing, child-care facilities, and projects that reduce sprawl and lower greenhouse gas emissions. A single legal challenge can stall a project for years, even when that project has strong community support and local government approval.

This comes in the face of a housing shortage that has made the cost of living in this state unsustainable for working families. RPA has run the numbers and found that New York State needs to add over 800,000 housing units by 2032 to address our shortage and start bringing down the cost of housing. If we are to truly get to an affordable New York, we need to make it easier to build housing.

At the same time, RPA recognizes that it matters where these units are located. For our region to flourish in the era of climate change, we need a relationship with nature that recognizes our built and natural environments as being two parts of an integrated whole. The most sustainable places in the region are those that are already developed. Higher concentrations of people and infrastructure make for communities that are more efficient in their use of energy, water, and other natural resources. The Governor's proposal accounts for this, by making it easier to build infill housing on previously disturbed land while maintaining reviews for greenfield developments and sprawl. The Legislature could build on this proposal to further disincentivize sprawl by granting exemptions for larger developments within close proximity of transit centers.

Without reform, SEQRA can perversely incentivize outcomes that undermine its original intent. Projects in walkable, transit-served communities are delayed or discouraged, while development shifts toward greenfield sites that increase sprawl, car dependence, and emissions. This is inconsistent with New York's climate commitments and regional planning best practices.

We commend the Legislature for its leadership on this issue. Senator Rachel May and Assemblymember Anna Kelles have been champions on this issue, advancing important reforms through the Sustainable Affordable Housing and Sprawl Prevention Act (S3492/A6283), which passed the Senate last year. Their work has helped lay the foundation for the Governor's proposal, and we applaud their continued commitment to refocusing SEQRA to allow for the infill housing that we need to address housing affordability while preventing sprawl.

Support for modernizing SEQRA is broad and diverse. Housing advocates, transit supporters, labor and business leaders from across the state have come together through the Unlock NY's Future campaign to call for change. These groups recognize that well-planned projects that reflect community priorities and advance shared climate and housing goals should be encouraged across the state.

Modernizing SEQRA does not mean weakening environmental review. It means updating the law to reflect today's interconnected realities: prioritizing projects that reduce emissions, support smart growth, and meet urgent housing and community needs, while eliminating unnecessary delays, duplicative reviews, and frivolous lawsuits that add cost without delivering environmental benefit.

RPA urges the Legislature to support the Governor's proposed SEQRA reforms as part of the FY27 budget. These changes will help New York deliver more affordable housing, child-care facilities, and climate-forward infrastructure, faster, more predictably, and more equitably, while upholding our commitment to environmental stewardship.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and we look forward to working with you to ensure SEQRA remains a strong, effective tool for the next generation of New Yorkers.