March 5, 2019

Representative Joe Aresimowicz
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Legislative Office Building, Room 4100
Hartford, CT 06106-1591

Dear Speaker Aresimowicz:

Last week there were two significant events that took place during public hearings which not only require your attention but also your intervention.

The first issue took place during a public hearing on February 28th regarding changes to Connecticut Liquor Laws. At this hearing, a chairman threatened two advocacy groups with a subpoena for certain information. The request for information, coupled with the threat of a subpoena, was also made prior to the hearing in writing. We are sure you understand the significant negative effect such actions can have on future public hearings in all committees. Under the precedent set in this situation, if a member of the public were to testify against a bill, or for that matter even support a bill, a chairperson could require that person, under the threat of a subpoena, to produce documents supporting their position. This puts a chilling effect on the entire public hearing process and raises serious questions.

For example, if a company testified that it’s hard to make a profit in Connecticut, do we threaten them with a subpoena for their tax return? If a person argued that they pay too much for prescription drugs, do we threaten them with a subpoena for their medication costs they have paid out of pocket? If one were to argue against the sales tax proposed by the Governor, would a chairperson be able to demand verification of the hardship imposed upon people who object? Or the same for those who testify against tolls? Where does that end?

The impact of this behavior would be an extreme deterrent upon those who want to testify on an issue knowing that if they disagree with the chairperson a subpoena could be issued. A chairperson should be focused on good government and open discussions, not public embarrassment.

The second issue involves an equally inappropriate display of uncharacteristic decorum at the Capitol. At an Environment Committee public hearing last week one of your caucus members decided to Google personal information about members of the public in an attempt to embarrass and curtail certain people from testifying. This sets an extremely dangerous precedent. Lawmakers should not be hastily searching for inflammatory personal information on the internet in an attempt to discredit someone when they come to the Capitol to testify on an issue. In addition to our concerns about this practice in
general, it’s even more alarming when you consider the obvious fact that not everything that’s on the internet is true. This type of behavior, attacking the individuals who come to the Capitol to support or oppose a piece of legislation, is not what open and fair government is about.

I hope that you agree with us that the state Capitol is meant to be the “People’s House.” It is not a house of bullies. It should be a place where all opinions and ideas are welcome. We’ve heard you personally encourage people to testify at the Capitol on multiple occasions. However, the actions of certain members of your caucus will dramatically discourage the very same public discourse you invite. Their actions suggest the public is only welcome to freely share their thoughts when they agree with those in charge. Otherwise, they run the risk of public embarrassment or being subpoenaed.

We are asking you as the Speaker of the House and leader of your caucus to meet with the lawmakers involved in these two situations and perhaps with your chairs of all committees to make it clear that we need to bring civility back to Connecticut’s public hearings. The public should never feel intimidated when they come to testify. No one should have the fear of being humiliated, embarrassed or harassed when they come to speak their mind on a bill – whether for or against any policy.

Sincerely,

Len Fasano
Senate Minority Leader

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House Republican Leader