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Written Testimony on H.4689 – An Act Relative to Buffer Zones for Battery Storage Facilities

Submitted by:

Aaron Langlois, RN, BSW, MBA, CHPN

President, Rural Equity Alliance of Massachusetts, Inc.

Former Oakham Select Board Member & Board of Health Member

Former Massachusetts Select Board Association Board Member (Worcester County)

Former Massachusetts Municipal Association Board Member

Former Massachusetts Local Government Advisory Committee Member

To: Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities & Energy

Date: November 8, 2025

Re: House Bill 4689 – An Act Relative to Buffer Zones for Battery Storage Facilities

Chair Cusack, Chair Barrett, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on House Bill 4689. I write in strong support of this legislation, which would establish consistent statewide buffer zones for large-scale Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) to protect public safety and community welfare.

As President of the nonprofit Rural Equity Alliance of Massachusetts, Inc., a former Oakham Select Board and Board of Health member, past Massachusetts Select Board Association Board Member for Worcester County, and past Massachusetts Local Government Advisory Committee member, I have seen how small towns with limited staff struggle just to manage essential services, never mind now being expected to navigate high-risk, industrial-scale energy projects without adequate state guidance or technical support. The absence of clear, enforceable standards leaves rural residents vulnerable and local officials overwhelmed.

Summary of House Bill 4689

House Bill 4689 seeks to ensure safer siting of battery storage facilities by requiring buffer zones between BESS installations and nearby structures, residential areas, and environmentally sensitive land. The bill directs the Department of Energy Resources (DOER) to define and implement these minimum distances, taking into account fire safety, chemical hazards, and emergency-response capacity. This framework provides a critical baseline for consistency and fairness across Massachusetts communities while still allowing municipalities to strengthen local bylaws.

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Why This Bill Is Essential

Rural towns like Oakham have population under 2,000 and operate without a Town Administrator or full-time professional staff. All boards are entirely volunteer-run. When large-scale battery systems are proposed, similar towns Oakham's size must interpret national codes and engineering plans that were never intended for their scale of governance. Without statewide standards, they are left to defend safety and environmental integrity on their own.

Buffer zones are a simple and effective protection. They reduce risk to nearby homes, wells, and schools and provide critical time for emergency responders. They also help preserve rural character and resident confidence in clean-energy development.

Recommended Amendments to Strengthen H.4689

1. Expand Representation and Participation to include at least one representative from a rural town under 2,000 residents.
2. Municipalities should retain the right to adopt stricter local setbacks.
3. Require Independent Engineering Certification.
4. Include Decommissioning and Financial Assurance.
5. Establish a Statewide Public Database.
6. Clarify and Protect Local Authority.
7. Provide Technical Assistance for Small Towns.

Conclusion

H.4689 is a necessary step toward safe, transparent, and equitable energy planning. It supports clean-energy progress while ensuring that no town, particularly the smallest and most rural, is left without the tools to protect its residents.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AL' followed by a stylized flourish.

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Written Testimony on H.4690 – An Act Establishing a Temporary Moratorium on the Siting of Lithium-Ion Battery Storage Facilities

Submitted by:

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Former Massachusetts Local Government Advisory Committee Member

To: Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities & Energy

Date: November 8, 2025

Re: House Bill 4690 – An Act Establishing a Temporary Moratorium on the Siting of Lithium-Ion Battery Storage Facilities

Chair Cusack, Chair Barrett, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 4690. I strongly support this bill, which establishes a temporary moratorium on new large-scale lithium-ion battery energy storage facilities until comprehensive siting and safety standards are adopted.

As President of the nonprofit Rural Equity Alliance of Massachusetts, Inc., and a former Oakham Select Board and Board of Health member, past Massachusetts Select Board Association Board Member for Worcester County, and past Massachusetts Local Government Advisory Committee member, I have witnessed firsthand how difficult it is for small towns to manage even day-to-day operations, let alone evaluate complex and potentially hazardous projects. Without clear and consistent state guidance, small rural communities are left to navigate unfamiliar technologies and risks with no support.

Summary of House Bill 4690

H.4690 would temporarily halt new permits for lithium-ion battery storage facilities while the Commonwealth studies their environmental, health, and safety impacts and develops appropriate regulations. The bill tasks state agencies with conducting a full review of risk factors, establishing best practices for siting and emergency management, and recommending permanent standards before the moratorium expires.

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Why the Moratorium Is Needed

Small rural communities, especially those with populations under 2,000, often operate without a Town Administrator, planner, or full-time staff. Conservation Commissions, Boards of Health, Planning Boards, and Fire Departments are all volunteer-based. Developers have increasingly targeted these areas because land is available and regulation is minimal. A statewide pause will allow these towns a fair chance to prepare and participate in policymaking.

Recommended Amendments to Strengthen H.4690

1. Set a Defined Duration and Deliverables.
2. Expand Representation and Participation to include at least one representative from a rural town under 2,000 residents.
3. Include Rural Capacity-Building Measures.
4. Mandate Comprehensive Risk Review.
5. Create a Centralized Incident and Inspection Database.
6. Encourage Safer Technologies.
7. Clarify Scope.

Conclusion

House Bill 4690 represents a thoughtful and necessary pause to ensure that Massachusetts develops responsible, transparent, and equitable energy-storage policy. This is especially vital for small towns that do not have full-time staff but still shoulder major responsibilities for public safety and environmental protection.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AL', is written over the signature line.

Aaron Langlois, RN, BSW, MBA, CHPN