

Thea Hart
Waterford
LD 258

LD 258 "An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024, and June 30, 2025"

Chairperson Rotundo, Chairperson Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs.

My name is Thea Hart, I am the project coordinator of the Norway Equitable Housing Cooperative (NEHC) in Norway Maine and I'm testifying in support of the proposed \$30 million housing budget split between RARHP and LIHTC programs. My project, NEHC, is a small, rural start-up that is uniquely resident-led and resident-owned. The project began organizing in July of 2021 out of my own need and the needs of fellow working and young people for quality stable housing. We are purchasing a lot within two blocks of Main Street Norway with dilapidated buildings and plans to rebuild 12 net-zero units. Our project would make it possible for folks like me to stay living and working in our vibrant rural community.

Norway has been lucky to have a project funded by the first round of the RARHP which is rehabilitating our historic Oddfellows building on Main Street. Thanks to this program, the Oddfellows isn't falling into deeper disrepair and disuse and has a future where it will serve our community's urgent need for housing.

When I learned of the RARHP program it became clear that this is our small project's best shot at success. This is the first program of it's kind from Maine Housing, to my knowledge, that welcomes applications from cooperatives, and supports smaller rural developments. NEHC, being a cooperative start-up, is less resourced than our competitors, the first \$20 million that funded the program came and went before we could apply. Despite missing out on the first round of funding, we have been hopeful that the speed at which the program's funds were assigned to projects might demonstrate the need for rural projects like ours and encourage another round of funding for the program.

Housing is the biggest issue facing our state— and I experience it while being very privileged and having support that most others don't. Our seniors, those working for minimum wage and those earning less than \$17 per hour; young families; those experiencing homelessness often do not have the privilege to create the housing they need. All of us deserve a safe, affordable place to live so we can continue to call Maine our home. The committee has a responsibility to respond to our state shortage of 20,000 affordable units by passing this proposed budget. Doing so would serve our rural communities and support high-quality dignified housing for those, and ideally, by those in need. Thank you for your work and for considering my testimony.