

Testimony in support of LD 1276 - An Act to Create and Sustain Jobs and Affordable Housing through Development of Cooperatives and Employee-owned Businesses

By

Kate Ahlefeld, Liberty Graphics Employee Cooperative

Senator Grohoski, Representative Perry, and members of the Committee, my name is Kate Ahlefeld and I am the Secretary of the Board of the Liberty Graphics Employee Cooperative. I am testifying in support of LD 1276, An Act to Create and Sustain Jobs and Affordable Housing through Development of Cooperatives and Employee-owned Businesses.

Since 1977, Liberty Graphics has flourished in the rural village of Liberty, Maine. Founder Tom Opper and his partner, artist Beverly Kocenko, created the company in a tiny trailer on his property and began producing small batches of T-shirts silk-screened by hand. Over the years, appreciation for the art and process grew in the community and beyond. We began selling to national and international customers, and our company became known as Maine's original water-based ink T-shirt printer.

After many successful years, Owner Tom Opper was looking for a way to step back from the day-to-day obligations of running a business. In 2019, Liberty Graphics employees began talking to Opper about the potential of buying the company through a worker cooperative. Most of our employees have been with the company for decades, and they wanted to see the business remain in Liberty and continue the momentum that was started in the late 70's.

It took more than two years of careful planning to bring the Liberty Graphics Employee Cooperative to fruition. We now have 22 member-owners with another 8 likely to join on June 1, 2023 out of a total of 35 employees. The employees are truly invested in their work, and enjoy having a say in the direction of the company. The Bangor Daily News ran a front-page article on May 12, 2021, chronicling our transition from private to cooperative ownership:

<https://www.bangordailynews.com/2021/05/12/news/midcoast/employees-purchase-i-conic-maine-t-shirt-company/>

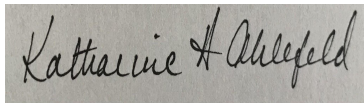
This cooperatively-owned business model has also helped us to attract new employees who are excited about being a part of a cooperatively-owned enterprise. We are thrilled to keep the business in rural Liberty, Maine, where there aren't a lot of good job

prospects. Liberty has a vibrant community though, and living close to work allows us more time to engage in local affairs.

We believe strongly that LD1276 should be made into law. Cooperative ownership has benefitted Liberty Graphics and allowed our business to continue and thrive. We hope that other businesses in Maine will have the same opportunity when the time comes.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Katharine H. Ahlefeld".

Katharine H. Ahlefeld, Board Secretary

Liberty Graphics Employee Cooperative

P.O. Box 5

Liberty, ME 04949

207-589-6500

[kate@lgtees.com](mailto:kate@lgtees.com)