

**Testimony In Support of LD 460, An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Improve Student Success and Workforce Readiness Within the University of Maine System**

**Respectfully submitted by Rebecca Swanson Conrad, Chair of the University of Southern Maine Board of Visitors**

**April 26, 2023**

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Committee on Appropriations & Financial Affairs. My name is Rebecca Swanson Conrad and I live in Auburn. I chair the Board of Visitors for the University of Southern Maine and also serve on the Muskie School's BOV. I am testifying today in support of LD 460, the \$100 million infrastructure bond for the University of Maine System.

My professional career spanned 35 years in senior leadership at two of Maine's private colleges but my volunteer efforts and philanthropy now specifically support public higher education because I believe our public universities form the bedrock of Maine's economic prosperity.

For years many of us in higher education sidestepped the business of running a college or university. But from my husband who owned a successful small business, I learned two basic principles: invest in your people and your facilities. Capital investment is a long-term business growth strategy while deferred maintenance leads to unplanned asset failure and on both fronts, your customers take notice.

The recent infrastructure investment supported by previous Legislatures is having a significant impact on all three of USM's campuses and is stimulating enrollment revitalization at the Lewiston campus, directly addressing the community's workforce needs in healthcare and behavioral health. I am grateful for the State's commitment, but like an entrepreneur predicting future growth and market trends, capital investment must be ongoing as part of best practice planning. Today's students have increasingly more choices among Maine's private colleges and universities. I am here to advocate for the UMaine System remaining a school of choice, not default for our students as well as attracting those from New England and beyond. But this is not facilities for facilities sake, it is investing in recruitment and retention to make our campuses compatible with 21st century learning. More than half of the System's public facilities and three-quarters of our residence halls have not been renovated for more than 50 years, many not meeting life safety standards and ADA requirements. From my years working at Bates College and Maine College of Art & Design, I can confirm that risk management in today's higher education landscape is serious and the System cannot slip behind basic norms.

In closing, as USM's BOV chair, I also serve *ex officio* on the board of the University of Southern Maine Foundation. I can attest that the last bond that funded nursing simulation and Portland Commons has been a driver for private charitable giving. Donors I personally knew who had turned elsewhere are back supporting USM, some with their largest lifetime gifts. Momentum is a powerful incentive and when the State provided early leadership funding, donors gained confidence that their personal investment would also help propel the university to new levels.

Maine relies on a steady supply of our well-educated graduates. Providing this early leadership again will ensure we are all working together toward the common goal of having the quality on our campuses to grow enrollment, drive research, attract corporate internships and meet the obligation for community and economic development that our System is intended to serve.

Thank you.