



**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***  
**From University of Maine Presque Isle Director of Admissions Susan White of Caribou**  
**April 26, 2023**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations & Financial Affairs: My name is Susan White and I am a proud graduate of the University of Southern Maine and the Director of Admissions at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. On behalf of UMPI and the University of Maine System (UMS), I am here to speak in support of the much-needed investment in System infrastructure proposed by LD 460.

From its founding in 1903 as a Normal School providing teacher preparation, UMPI has been essential to ensuring a bright future for Aroostook County.

You are well aware that our public universities have deepening enrollment challenges that require us to think creatively when it comes to the recruitment and retention of our students. For example, over the past five years, credit hours from in-state students are down 29.3% at UMPI, and out-of-state student credit hours have decreased 27.1%. While some enrollment losses can be attributed to the pandemic and Maine's demographics, they are exacerbated by the increased competitiveness of facilities at peer institutions including private colleges in Maine and public and private schools out-of-state.

Furthermore, as students come to us after having anything but a normal high school experience due to the disruptions of the pandemic, it is our responsibility as a low-barrier public university to have the proper resources readily available to support them to be successful in and out of the classroom. We know, and research supports, that the optimum way for students to leverage those resources including mental health, academic and peer supports is to live on-campus where those services are available to them 24/7. Living on-campus can also be more affordable, and thus reduce time to graduation and student debt. In our rural region, off-campus housing is not readily available and a recent cost comparison found that on-campus housing is less expensive and more flexible.

To be successful in the recruitment and retention of students as a small, rural public university in an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace, we have to look at all aspects of the student experience, especially on-campus housing. UMPI's current residence halls and related facilities do not reflect the dynamic needs of our students or what they and their families have expressed as the characteristics that they feel are important when making a college decision.

As the Director of Admissions, I have the privilege of interacting with prospective students and their families on a regular basis. I hear what students say they need and what their families want for them as they make this major transition to adulthood and independence. Students have

expressed the desire to be part of a community while at the same time, having their own space to live and study, but our current residence halls lack single rooms and common areas for students to gather. Meanwhile, parents want to leave their students at a place that is clean, dry and safe. While we may refer to it as deferred maintenance, what students and families rightfully expect is relatively basic convenience, comforts and accessibility.

While this can be daunting to think about, I am motivated by the incredible potential of our university and our duty to serve the County and the state.

As a former PK-12 teacher and district administrator in Aroostook County, I saw first-hand the impact that UMPI has on our schools and communities. I remember one staff meeting when I was a building principal when I learned that every teacher and ed tech except for one from out-of-state was an UMPI graduate. UMPI graduates those that are called to be public servants as teachers, coaches, police officers, nurses and social workers. Our students become engaged with the community as part of their classwork and then decide to stay and continue to give back to the County in their careers and civic lives, even if they are not originally from here.

Aroostook County's future depends on the sustainability and success of UMPI, and also our sister public university in Fort Kent. If we cannot meet the needs of the County's students, they will go elsewhere for college and are less likely to ever come back. However, if properly resourced, including with improved residence halls that are attractive to students as well as upgrades to academic and other spaces, UMPI and UMFK can better do our part to keep Aroostook County's best and brightest in this region, while attracting new talent from away to help strengthen and grow the workforce and our communities.

Despite how we work to leverage the gifts we receive from our donors and alumni, our ability to make substantive changes to our campus facilities falls far short of what really needs to be done. For this reason, State support is so important to us.

I strongly urge you to support infrastructure and other investment for Maine's public universities and I thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your ongoing support of our incredible students.