SIERRA CLUB
MAINE CHAPTER

PO Box 88
Belfast, ME 04915
Phone: (207) 761-5616
www.sierraclub.org/maine

To: Members of the Joint Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology,
From: Jacob Stern
Date: April 27, 2023
Re: **Testimony in Support of L.D. 1606: *An Act to Finance Clean Energy and Infrastructure in Maine***

Senator Lawrence, Representative Zeigler, and the members of the Joint Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology,

I am submitting the following testimony on behalf of Sierra Club Maine, representing over 22,000 supporters and members statewide. Founded in 1892, Sierra Club is one of our nation's oldest and largest environmental organizations. We work diligently to amplify the power of our 3.8 million members nation-wide as we work towards combating climate change and promoting a just and sustainable economy. To that end, we urge an "ought to pass" report on L.D. 1606: *An Act to Finance Clean Energy and Infrastructure in Maine*, with a possible amendment, as outlined below.

This legislation would help public schools invest in energy efficiency and clean energy upgrades by providing grants and zero-interest loans to fund qualifying projects. As written, the bill establishes a grant program for schools under the Maine Clean Energy and Sustainability Accelerator. As outlined in statute, the Accelerator is intended specifically to provide financing for clean energy projects in the form of low-interest loans and other financial mechanisms. Grants are not specifically disallowed, but nor are they specifically mentioned in the list of financial mechanisms (see 35-A §10129, sub-§4B). While we strongly support the intention and goals of L.D. 1606, we propose three simple changes to bring the bill in better alignment with existing statute:

- Place grant program outlined in Section 1 under the purview of Efficiency Maine Trust instead of the Maine Clean Energy and Sustainability Accelerator.
- By contrast, the zero-interest loan program described in the bill could and should be housed under the Maine Clean Energy and Sustainability Accelerator, instead of Efficiency Maine Trust.
- Add a requirement that any audits of school buildings focus on eliminating or drastically reducing fossil fuel consumption. It is critical that electrification be a significant focus of the retrofit process. Simply focusing on reducing energy consumption is insufficient to reach our climate goals.

We'd also propose using energy-saving performance contracting (ESPC) as a means of funding energy retrofits in public buildings. ESPC programs are able to offer preliminary technical audit and assistance to communities seeking to move forward with audit and retrofit projects.[1]

As Maine increasingly transitions away from fossil fuels and embraces renewable generation as a means to power our homes and businesses, we must prioritize the most impactful investments first. It is easy to see why schools would be near the top of the list. The vast majority of Maine children attend public schools, meaning that students everywhere would see benefits from this legislation. Additionally, schools tend to be housed in large buildings, with high rates of energy consumption and remain continuously in operation for many decades. In fact, public schools consume approximately 8% of all energy use in the commercial buildings sector.[2] Over many years, there is an opportunity to significantly reduce energy use in these facilities, and ultimately, save money.

1. **Many schools are already making clean energy investments and upgrades on their own.** In Maine and around the country, public school systems are taking advantage of modern energy efficiency technology to reduce their electricity use. For example, the town of Sullivan constructed a new 103,000 square foot school, complete with air-source heat pumps and energy recovery ventilation, to replace the 70-year old Sumner Memorial high school.[3] Many Maine school systems, from Kittery to Eastport have also made less drastic, but significant upgrades in their buildings. This legislation would help level the playing field, allowing school districts with the great needs to make the same investments as those in wealthier communities with more resources.

2. **Clean energy upgrades can improve indoor air quality for students and teachers.** Researchers have clearly established a link between fossil fuel use, indoor air quality, and public health outcomes. For example, burning gas for heating or cooking releases carbon monoxide, formaldehyde and other harmful pollutants to circulate in the air.[4] Beyond strict investments in clean energy, upgrading an HVAC system to make use of air source heat pumps provides an opportunity to reduce these other airborne irritants and others, such as pollen and particulate matter. In

[1] Federal Energy Management Program. "Energy Savings Performance Contracts for Federal Agencies." https://www.energy.gov/femp/energy-savings-performance-contracts-federal-agencies#.
[2] Sierra Club. "100% Clean Energy School Districts Campaign." April 2019. p. 5. https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/Clean_Schools_Toolkit.pdf.
[3] CHA Companies. "Charles M. Sumner Learning Campus." https://www.chacompanies.com/projects/charles-m-sumner-learning-campus/.
[4] California Air Resources Board. Indoor Air Pollution from Cooking. https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/documents/indoor-air-pollution-cooking.

particular, our Black and low-income communities stand to benefit from better air quality in public schools – Black Americans suffer from asthma-related deaths at a higher rate than White and Hispanic Americans combined.[5]

3. **Clean energy and efficiency upgrades save taxpayers money.** Without a doubt, lowering the annual energy use for a large commercial building, like a school, has the potential for tremendous savings over the course of the decades the facility will be in operation. The Mount Desert Island High School is projected to save around $1.4 million over the next twenty five years. The school generates 100% of the electricity it needs to operate from on-site solar panels.[6] Another school in Batesville, Arkansas recently invested in solar panels, new lights, heating and cooling systems, and efficient windows. The upgrades managed to save the school hundreds of thousands of dollars in the short term, allowing the district to boost teacher salaries as a result, and the district is ultimately projected to save a total of $2.4 million over the course of twenty years.[7]

4. **Retrofitting our schools will help us hit Maine's climate goals.** If every U.S. public school used 100% clean energy, the corresponding reduction in emissions would be equivalent to closing 18 coal-fired power plants.[8] Investing in energy efficiency and clean energy upgrades for Maine's public schools is clearly highlighted in the "Maine Won't Wait" climate plan. Additionally, this legislation presents a unique opportunity to educate youth about how Maine's electricity is generated and used – and to potentially invite them to participate in, or even be a driving force in the process, as was the case at Mount Desert High School.

For these reasons we urge an "ought to pass" report on L.D. 1601: *An Act to Finance Clean Energy and Infrastructure in Maine*. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Jacob Stern

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Volunteer Vice Chair
Sierra Club Maine Chapter

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[5] Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. "Asthma Disparities in America." August 2020. p. 40. https://www.aafa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/asthma-disparities-in-america-burden-on-racial-ethnic-minorities.pdf.
[6] Mount Desert Island Solar Project. https://solarhighschool.com/.
[7] Energy News Network. "This Arkansas school turned solar savings into better teacher pay." October 2020. https://energynews.us/2020/10/16/this-arkansas-school-turned-solar-savings-into-better-teacher-pay/.
[8] Ibid