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Rep. Steven D. Foster

Testimony to the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee

In Support of LD 2092, "An Act to Equalize Funding for the Maine Maritime Academy"

Wednesday, January 31, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I'm Steve Foster, Representative for House District 32, serving Charleston, Dexter, Exeter, Garland, Stetson, and a part of Bradford, proudly here in support of LD 2092, "An Act to Equalize Funding for the Maine Maritime Academy". I am proud to advocate on behalf of this bill as its lead cosponsor and as a graduate of Maine Maritime Academy, Class of 1978.

You've been provided a Background and Summary document outlining the fiscal details of this funding request, which I hope you'll take the time to review. I could comment in regard to the information it contains, but will use my time to tell you a little bit of why I believe the Legislature needs to do more to make a Maine Maritime Academy education available to more Maine students, particularly those who might be looking at a maritime or engineering career but are being lured by competing programs in other states. I can tell you firsthand that Maine Maritime Academy fully prepared me for a rewarding career where I was able to apply the leadership skills, ingenuity, and work ethic cultivated in me and my classmates while in Castine.

Upon graduation from Maine Maritime Academy I accepted one of five job offers, and began a 19 ½ year career as a Merchant Marine engineering officer, which allowed my wife and me to stay in Maine, raising our children near our home towns and families, while earning a living often realized only by other Maine kids by moving out of state. By the way, job placement for the class of '78 was well over 100% within 60 days of graduation, a trend that continues to this day.

My next career began when I took my skillset to Sappi's Skowhegan Pulp and Paper Mill, accepting a position in Maintenance Management, the first MMA grad assigned in the paper machine area, directly from a sea going background. Because of my MMA education and

resulting experiences, I advanced in positions during my 19 years with Sappi, spending the last 12 as Paper Mill Maintenance Manager.

This adventure, which began in August of '74, allowed me to see the world, return home to help raise my family and contribute to my community. This is a future I'd like to see available to as many Maine students as possible by providing them the opportunity to develop leadership, earn a good salary, and become one who might strive to contribute to their Maine community in the greatest way possible.

That's the future Maine students who attend MMA can expect. There is a good reason our state maritime academy has been named as having one of the highest returns on investment among small colleges. 2021 US Department of Education data shows the median annual earnings of individuals who received federal student aid averaged over \$85,000, ten years after beginning classes at MMA, regardless of completion status. That is more than double the statewide average, and significantly ahead of MMA's closest competitor among state colleges and universities, which came in at less than \$50,000.

That's why it's discouraging to see Maine underfund MMA and not adequately invest in an undeniably important return on investment to the state. Massachusetts Maritime Academy makes sport out of recruiting Maine students to join their ranks to leave our state for what I believe is an inferior education. I think we should draw a line in the sand. In my day, we always had more Massachusetts residents attending Maine Maritime than the reverse. And no matter the ship you were on or the company you worked for, new Maine Maritime grads were preferred over Mass grads, every time.

Maine Maritime Academy currently receives 25% less of its annual operating budget from the state when compared to its similarly sized peers in the other two public higher education systems. While state campuses within 50% of MMA's enrollment average over 49% of their operational budgets being state supplied, MMA's sits at 24%. We saw some progress in this metric last session when MMA received an operational funding bump, but the disparity is so wide we need to seriously consider further action. There is simply no good reason to underfund MMA to such an extent. And so long as Mass Maritime receives 40% of its operational funds from its host state, we're going to struggle to get MMA in the truly competitive posture it deserves. I can't accept that.

Today this bill has the support of folks from management-oriented roles in our construction and shipyard sectors and Maine's largest public-employee union alike. It has the support of Republican and Democrat co-sponsors, who all recognize the return-on-investment MMA brings to our state as something to better cultivate. I hope after careful consideration, it will have your support as well. We should not have such a glaring funding disparity between our three systems of public higher education. We should fund Maine Maritime Academy equitably, fully utilizing its unique role in Maine's future economy.

I would be glad to answer questions and continue working with the Committee to ensure some meaningful progress in the quest for funding parity for MMA. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,
Steve Foster
State Representative

