



Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
in support of LD 2007, An Act to Advance Self-determination for Wabanaki Nations
Amy Winston, State Policy Director
2/26/24

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Amy Winston and I live in Edgecomb. I am testifying today on behalf of [Coastal Enterprises, Inc. \(CEI\)](#), a non-profit community development corporation (CDC) and community development financial institution (CDFI) based in Brunswick. **CEI's mission is to build a just, vibrant, and climate-resilient future to make the economy more equitable for people and communities in Maine** and rural regions. We do this by integrating finance, business expertise, and policy solutions. Since its founding in 1977, CEI has invested \$1.53 billion in 3,222 businesses and projects in Maine and rural regions throughout the U.S.

CEI strongly supports LD 2007. CEI's President, Keith Bisson, serves as the CDFI representative on Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. The Permanent Commission has prioritized LD 2007 for its ability to advance racial equity and economic justice in Maine. In 2022, we [testified in support](#) of tribal sovereignty (LD 1626) on the basis of the economic benefits of self-determination.

With high levels of unemployment, poor health, inadequate housing, and myriad issues related to persistent and generational poverty, Native Americans are among the poorest Americans. An ability to make long-term decisions for the benefit of the community according to an agenda that is set by the tribes, for the tribes, is needed. The current model that is practiced by most indigenous nations in the US is self-determination, afforded by full access to the suite of resources accessible to federally recognized tribes.

Unlike most federally recognized tribes, the Wabanaki lack the legal basis for sovereignty that is contained in this bill and needed to access capital, build infrastructure and institutions, start and sustain businesses, provide health and social services, education, and job training. Under Maine's current framework, the Wabanaki function as a municipal equivalent in a domestic-dependent nation (or internal colony) inside the US. Repealing Maine's Implementing Act will enable the tribes to pursue a proactive approach to economic development with outcomes that will more broadly benefit Maine.

Native nations understand their needs and know what their priorities should be. Research from the [Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development](#)¹ and the [Native Nation Building Institute at the University of Arizona](#)² shows that resources are better used when allocated according to tribal objectives. The literature is replete with examples of Native nations asserting their decision-making authority, strategically and for the long-term, and backing up that authority with effective governance. Many tribes have used tribal self-government to increase economic growth significantly compared with the Wabanaki. They have built manufacturing and retail sectors and created destination

¹ Kalt, Joseph, et al. 2022. Economic and Social Impacts of Restrictions of Federal Indian Policies to the Wabanaki Nations in Maine. The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.

² Jorgensen, Miriam, and Joan Timeche. Investing in Rural Prosperity Chapter 7: "Native America x Rural America: Tribal Nations as Key Players in Regional Rural Economies" *Saint Louis Fed Eagle*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 23 Nov. 2021, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/community-development/publications/invest-in-...>



communities through cultural tourism, generating jobs and increasing incomes for tribal members and nontribal residents in surrounding communities. The exercise of tribal sovereignty has resulted in more economic growth and improved the well-being of American Indians more than during any other time since European contact and colonization.

In the last 30 years, increased self-governance over tribal lands and resources has created new economic and employment opportunities for both tribal and nontribal citizens.³ It is estimated that access to these same resources has the potential to increase Maine's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) by more than \$300 million a year, create over 2,000 new jobs that will expand economic opportunities on and off tribal lands, and generate \$39 million annually in state and local tax revenue. *Maine's ability to engage with the Wabanaki tribes in a government-to-government fashion will yield positive economic results for all of Maine.*

Over four decades as a CDFI, the team at CEI has learned that *when local people are empowered to exercise agency over their own livelihoods – to set the agenda, make decisions and access the necessary resources to build local capacities for leadership, investment, and long-term development – people's lives improve, businesses grow, and communities flourish.*

We urge the committee to vote Ought-to-Pass on LD 2007.

³ Akee, Randall. January 19, 2021. "Sovereignty and improved economic outcomes for American Indians: Building on the gains made since 1990." Center for Equitable Growth. Boosting Wages for US Workers in the New Economy Series. Accessed at <https://equitablegrowth.org/sovereignty-and-improved-economic-outcomes-for-american-indians-building-on-the-gains-made-since-1990/>