

March 2, 2024

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. Senator Brenner, Representative Gramlich, and members of the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

My name is Kerem Gungor. I am a senior environmental engineer at DEP Bureau of Land Resources. I am writing this testimony on my own time to express my personal experience with engineer recruitment and share my personal thoughts with the Committees. I am asking for your support in the supplemental budget to address issues with the state employee pay gap and our ongoing experience with understaffing.

I am currently supervising two environmental engineers and two assistant environmental engineers. I have one vacant assistant environmental engineer position in my team. The Bureau of Land Resources relies on my team's technical expertise to ensure that the land development projects are permitted in compliance with the state's stormwater regulations so that their impact on Maine's waters is mitigated.

Since I assumed this supervisory position in March 2022, I tried to recruit for the vacant environmental engineer position which requires the successful candidate to have a "professional engineer" license issued by the State Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers. None of the applicants was qualified for the position; hence, we could not move forward with interviews and fill the position. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence. Before I assumed the senior environmental engineer position, the Bureau attempted to hire an environmental engineer. This attempt was also unsuccessful. Non-competitive salary is a major reason hampering recruitment. I must note that DEP provides 11% stipend on top of the base pay for the engineers. Even this augmented salary is insufficient to help the State compete with the other public sector employers in New England area: most recent salary survey of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) has shown that median base salary of the licensed civil engineers working for the state and local governments in New England Area is \$121,096. I must highlight the fact that private employers are also competing for the same talent by providing even higher salaries. This paints a grim picture for the State's ability to recruit and retain qualified engineers.

Another evidence that demonstrates the non-competitive nature of the current pay schedule is as follows: successful candidates almost always negotiate to start at a higher step since Step 1 pay offered to new employees by policy is too low for most candidates to accept. Supervisory staff like me allocate a significant amount of their time into employee recruitment efforts and find themselves unable to fill vacancies due to the pay gap which is beyond their control. This is not efficient and these recurring circumstances create barriers in the best use DEP's time and resources. This is just my story; these issues extend throughout many parts of this Department, and I ask for your steadfast support to put these challenges behind us. I believe that it is past time to address the pay gap and re-adjust the base pay schedules to eliminate the need for stopgap measures like providing stipends for the engineers.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide my personal testimony on this important issue.

Respectfully submitted,

Kerem Gungor

Oakland