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Maine's Rural Development Council

**Testimony of Nancy Smith, Executive Director of GrowSmart Maine
in support of Public Transportation Components in LD 258, Biennial
Budget for Fiscal Years 2024-2025 and LD 259,
Highway Fund for Fiscal Years 2024-2025
(Part D Maine Office of Community Affairs
and Maine Development Ready Commission)**

February 5, 2-25

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development,

My name is Nancy Smith and I am the CEO of GrowSmart Maine. We are a statewide non-partisan non-profit organization helping communities navigate change in alignment with smart growth. We advocate for comprehensive policies and funding for smart growth practices and outcomes.

We partner with Build Maine to co-host a transparent crowd-sourcing of policy proposals that has drawn together over a hundred people from across Maine and beyond. [Policy Action 2025](#) follows [Policy Action 2023](#) from the 131st Legislature. Each session we strive to meet this goal, ***“to address barriers to and create incentives for equitable, sustainable growth and development that strengthens downtowns and villages of all sizes while pulling development pressure away from productive and open natural areas.”*** We believe Part D of the biennial budget will increase Maine’s capacity to achieve this goal.

Two of the seven working groups in Policy Action 2025 are to

- Advance state policies to Improve Municipal Development Capacity
- Continue to Advocate for Government Coordination.

While there are several bills in Policy Action 2025 to advance these strategies, the actions in Part D of the budget are a significant step in improving municipal capacity and in coordination those aspects of state government that support municipalities. This is government efficiency at its best.

While GrowSmart advocates for smart growth policy and investments here in Augusta, we are providing technical expertise and resources in communities across Maine.

Local grasstop leaders are eager for tools to help them navigate the change that's coming at a pace none of us would have anticipated five years ago. Demand for housing in all price ranges, but especially homes that are attainable for working people, preparing for the next extreme weather event, protecting farmland and ensuring farm viability; these are just some of the interrelated challenges where federal, state, municipal and regional capacity needs to be increased and better coordinated. Resources are available, but systems are hard to navigate.

One of the most powerful outcomes of our community programming, **[Building Community Strength](#)**, has been a “speed dating session” where residents of ten towns from Skowhegan to Calais to Presque Isle were paired with staff from state and federal agencies and Congressional offices. Everyone embraced the value of getting to know each other even for just a few minutes. This step removed the uncertainty from reaching out to ask for help. I see MOCA as providing a similar kind of accessibility between Maine communities and government resources and expertise. Municipal and regional strategies become things we can really do!

I listened in on the release last week to the Housing and Economic Development Committee of **[A Roadmap for the Future of Housing Production in Maine](#)**. I'm excited to see that several of the strategies outlined here are included in Policy Action 2025, and more relevant here, **the roadmap will be easier to implement with the various programs and agencies housed together both physically and legislatively.**

Part D of the budget is a sound investment, with a small addition of two administrative positions to support the office so others can focus on their programmatic work. The budget also makes permanent several positions that are currently limited period only. The value of the Municipal Planning Assistance and Housing Opportunity Programs are clear, and worthy of ongoing investment.

In closing, I'll also note our support of improvements to the **Development Ready Advisory Committee**, also noted in Part D. Broadening membership in the Committee will lead to more meaningful impact for Maine communities working to redevelop derelict buildings, and that is one of the most powerful strategies for strengthening downtown and village centers across Maine.

GrowSmart Maine is willing to assist the committee in any way that is helpful.

