



Testimony of Island Institute in Support of LD 210 An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026, and June 30, 2027”

February 5, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Senator Curry, Representative Gattine, Representative Gere, and Distinguished Members of the Committees, my name is Nick Battista, and I am testifying on behalf of Island Institute in support of LD 210 and specifically in support of the Maine Office of Community Affairs and the Part D of the budget that enables this office to accomplish its work.

Island Institute is a 42-year-old nonprofit organization based in Rockland, Maine. We boldly navigate climate and economic change with island and coastal communities to expand opportunities and deliver solutions. The “with” in our mission is essential. We collaborate and partner with Maine communities and businesses in all our work. Much of our work takes place in the communities that are highly dependent on fishing, and the bulk of these communities are east of Damariscotta.

Maine’s island and coastal communities are on the front line of dealing with challenging demographic trends, changing economic outlooks for key industries, and climate change. Many challenges facing coastal communities come from beyond the community and often exceed their capacity to plan and implement strategies to address them. Seventy-five percent of Maine’s coastal communities have fewer than 3,800 people, and 25 percent of coastal communities have fewer than 850 people. These small communities regularly find it challenging to find enough volunteers to be on the select board and involved in other committees. Many of these communities do not have a land use planner on staff or capacity beyond the town manager or administrator to help the community move significant projects forward.

In our work with these communities, Island Institute staff regularly work with staff from the Maine Coastal Program, Maine Floodplain Program, and Volunteer Maine. The Coastal Program is an integral partner in our work to preserve and enhance the resilience of Maine’s working waterfronts – both publicly owned and privately owned working waterfronts.

Our work with Volunteer Maine is centered on programs that provide additional capacity to communities, programs such as the Maine Service Fellows and the Climate Corps. We know these programs can be impactful for communities because, for the last 25 years, Island Institute has run our own version of a program to provide capacity directly to communities - the Island Institute Fellows Program. This program has provided over 500,000 hours of assistance to Maine’s communities.

We are also a Community Resilience Partnership service provider. In that role, we actively assist communities through the program and have seen these resources have a transformative impact. For example, on Long Island and Chebeague Island, CRP funds were instrumental in conducting groundwater sustainability studies, which is a pivotal step in preserving and maintaining the crucial aquifers on these islands as rising sea levels threaten drinking water. The Cranberry Isles used CRP funds to install a solar array system with battery backup on municipal buildings to ensure reliable power critical to the community in the face of extreme storms.

As we work with communities and businesses, we regularly run into questions about coastal flooding, floodplain maps, and how to deal with the tricky issues associated with critical infrastructure in areas prone to storm surge. The Maine Floodplain Program is a valuable partner in these conversations. Similarly, these conversations often turn to questions about comprehensive plans, land use ordinances, and how the community can achieve their goals.

Housing is a top issue for many coastal communities – in about 1/3 of Maine’s coastal communities, more than 25% of homes are seasonal, and a handful of communities are made up of over 60% seasonal homes. According to Maine Housing’s housing affordability index, there are only 5 coastal communities where the income needed to purchase a home at the median home price is below the median income for the community. In many coastal communities, the income needed to afford the median home price is well beyond the median income in the community. In our work, housing regularly comes up as a structural barrier blocking communities from making progress on other vital issues.

Having these programs in one office will allow for much needed coordination across programs, communities, and third-party entities like Island Institute. From our work, we see opportunities here to increase the efficiency and impact of this critical work. We regularly field calls from the communities we work with who are confused about where to turn for support on various issues. A one-stop-shop for communities looking to partner with the State on multiple topics is invaluable.

In conclusion, I urge the Committee to support part D of the budget, the associated permanent positions, and the new Maine Office of Community Affairs. The communities in which we work will benefit significantly from this office. Your thoughtful consideration is appreciated.