



Maine Coast Heritage Trust

A Statewide Land Conservation Organization

Testimony on
LD 226: An Act to Protect the Cultural Resources and Historical Heritage of Sears Island in
Searsport by Extending Conservation Easement Protections

Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera, and members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, my name is Jeff Romano. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Maine Coast Heritage Trust neither for nor against LD 226.

Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT) seeks to advance the conservation of lands and waters in Maine to ensure ecological wellbeing and foster thriving communities. Over the past five decades, we have conserved more than 185,000 acres, including over 160 places open for traditional outdoor recreation.

During the Sears Island Planning Initiative discussions that led to the 2007 Consent Agreement, we participated as an observer and a resource. The agreement, heralded by the Baldacci Administration as a major victory for balancing the various competing interests, asked MDOT to set aside 601 acres for conservation and recreation purposes, in exchange for assurances that the island's remaining 339 acres would remain available for future transportation needs. The signatories specified that the conservation and recreation values should be protected through a conservation easement with a holder committed to being a "neutral third party with no conflict of interest, based on any interest in a particular outcome for Sears Island."

In 2009, the Maine Department of Transportation asked Maine Coast Heritage Trust to be the easement holder. We agreed and have effectively played that role ever since. MCHT continues to focus on fulfilling our easement responsibilities and we continue to follow the wishes of the Sears Island Planning Commission, by not expressing support for any particular outcome on the island.

Should state policymakers decide to enact LD 226, effectively repealing the 2007 Consent Agreement, we would be available to share our expertise to inform any additional conservation activities on Sears Island. However, MCHT is concerned with the precedent this bill may establish. What will it mean for future discussions in which conservation interests find consensus with other community interests? Have conditions substantially changed to warrant a reversal of the much-celebrated agreement reached less than twenty years ago?

Lastly, on a more technical note, the current bill would amend how the conservation land manager is appointed, by shifting responsibility from MDOT to MCHT. The current system works and should remain unchanged.

Again, thanks for the opportunity to speak today. Happy to answer any questions.