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Brunswick, ME
May 2, 2025

Committee on Housing and Economic Development
Maine Legislature

Re: Support for LD 1637, An Act to Reform the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (MRRA)

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development,

I am writing in support of LD 1637, An Act to Reform the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (MRRA).

On August 19, 2024, Brunswick residents had a wake-up call. In the early hours, the malfunction of the AFFF firefighting foam system in Hangar 4 at Brunswick Executive Airport on Brunswick Landing led to the sixth-largest spill of its kind to ever occur in the United States. This proved to be the most recent in a series of missteps and negligence over the years by the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (MRRA) that led up to this catastrophe that occurred less than a mile from many homes (including my own). The release of a tremendous quantity of PFAS-laden contamination into the surrounding environment has impacted the community (in ways that are not yet fully understood) for many years to come. However, this disaster also highlighted many of the shortfalls presented by the odd quasi-governmental structure that exists on Brunswick Landing and has led to the frequent refrain that it is a "town within a town."

"Town" without representation: In reality, the thousands of residents/businesses on Brunswick Landing have no levers of influence through a publicly elected body of "town" government. In the aftermath of this huge failure to safeguard Brunswick residents and our environment, I rapidly came to realize (just a very short time after moving to Brunswick Landing) that the community had no ability to influence decisions being made by MRRA. Questions asked during public meetings rarely receive a response. Complaints and concerns expressed to our publicly elected officials have been well-received, but they have no direct authority over MRRA either. Responses and actions to any requests made of MRRA have consistently been outrageously slow and underwhelming. Most recently, a commitment by MRRA in February to disable the toxic firefighting foam system in all hangars by late May has been potentially delayed, with no public acknowledgement of the earlier promise made at multiple public meetings. As one of many residents to spend countless hours attending meetings, writing letters, combing through volumes of reports detailing MRRA's failures and lack of transparency, and demanding the urgent change that the community required, it quickly became clear that our voices currently have no power. With no election to win or direct public oversight, there is no incentive for MRRA to listen to the public outcry, and this is particularly disheartening when it literally applies to issues that directly impact my own backyard. While this legislation unfortunately falls short of resolving this concern fully, it does at least provide a small step toward improving representation for the community.

Prioritize the environment/public health: MRRA is responsible for an area that is a severely contaminated Superfund site. However, this is not a relatively secluded and unpopulated area along the edge of town. The successful real estate development of Brunswick Landing over the years has turned the community into a bustling area of homes/businesses. And, there may have been a time prior to this growth when prioritizing such development may have made sense. However, the toxic substances that exist from the years of contamination by the Navy and MRRA should now be the priority to safeguard public health and safety. The identification and quantification of these threats (particularly related to PFAS "forever chemicals") is still a work in progress by the Navy. As a group with real estate and airport development expertise, MRRA has indeed been quite successful over the years. But part of this success is that Brunswick Landing has evolved into an area with very different needs than a decade ago as this tremendous growth has occurred. With this in mind, it is imperative that MRRA's focus now pivots to prioritize the safety of public health and the environment by requiring environmental stewardship in statute.

Protecting against gross negligence: I understand that an amendment may be offered that removes this portion of the legislation. While I would reluctantly support a bill that allows these protections to remain in place for MRRA if there is no alternative, I do feel strongly that this would be an unfortunate outcome that removes a critical component of the legislation. As details emerged regarding the events that led up to the August 2024 disaster, it became clear that MRRA has been plagued by a history of inadequate maintenance, undisclosed toxic spills, and a reluctance to prioritize the protection of the environment and surrounding community over the years. The events that have led to this point have not simply been unfortunate and entirely unavoidable accidents. At a minimum, this stemmed from a history of mismanagement and oversights, while in the worst-case scenario there may have been negligence. Ignoring the past though, the key is to avoid additional disasters in the future that further increase the burden on our community and environment.

While this legislation would not resolve all of these issues, it is a desperately needed step in the right direction to:

- Refocus MRRA on addressing the severe contamination at Brunswick Landing.
- Empower residents with a stronger voice in decisions impacting public health and the environment.
- Establish liability for MRRA in cases of gross negligence to prevent future disasters.

I urge the Committee to vote "Ought to Pass" on LD 1637.

Joel Widenor
Brunswick