

GMA Testimony in support of LD 1940, *An Act to Revise the Growth Management Law*  
7 May 2025

Please accept this testimony in support of LD 1940, An Act to Revise the Growth Management Act.

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

My name is Dan Edwards. I've worked as a professional writer and communications strategist for more than 30 years, working with a diverse range of corporate and not-for-profit clients. More recently, I've expanded my practice to include work for both developers and municipalities, for clients in Somerville, Massachusetts, Nashua, New Hampshire, and Brunswick, Maine. I also hold a J.D. from the University of Maine School of Law. I practiced as a transactional real estate attorney with Norman, Hanson & Detroy; a real estate litigation attorney at Bernstein Shur; and as in-house counsel for Portland's East Brown Cow.

With this testimony, I hope to share a perspective based on my experience as lead writer on the Brunswick comprehensive plan development process, which is currently in process.

Because I was a relative newcomer to the municipal realm, the prospect of my involvement with the Brunswick comp plan project spurred me to review several plans completed by other Maine municipalities. It also compelled me to review Maine's current Growth Management Act, with specific focus on the long list of essential comp plan elements articulated in M.R.S.A. 30-A, Section 4326.

Over the course of the project, I continued my rapid climb up the comprehensive plan learning curve — and devoted a lot of time thinking about what comprehensive plans should *do*. As a lay person and town resident, I entered the process with a naive sense that comprehensive plans should be living, breathing documents that reflected the shared acknowledgement of what was working in a given municipality — and what wasn't. I also felt strongly that comprehensive plans should then provide a clear sense of the path the community should take over the course of the coming 10 years to pursue a shared vision, based in large part on resident input gathered during the process of formulating the plan.

The challenge for the municipality — and more specifically the team appointed to execute the plan — was that the plan elements required by the GMA were exhaustive, and in many cases, irrelevant or inconsistent with the more meaningful task of addressing residents' articulated concerns, and developing shared, actionable, and measurable goals.

While the GMA's list of required elements is designed to ensure some level of comprehensive plan uniformity my experience suggests that the current law has created a situation where the tail is wagging the dog. Under the current law, municipalities seeking state approval are compelled to devote more time to checking GMA boxes — than to producing plans that actually *work* toward the desired ends expressed during public input gathering sessions.

As a result of this regulation-heavy endeavor, more effort goes into developing comp plans that are GMA-responsive than to producing actionable documents towns can use to communicate, pursue, and monitor progress toward a shared vision. In short, once municipalities jump through the myriad hoops necessary to gain plan approval, there's little energy or appetite left over to pursue its stated objectives.

Comprehensive plans should be far more focused on communities and action than on strict response to GMA requirements. In effect, my sense is that the GMA should consider a ground-up reconsideration of the critical audience for comprehensive plans — and on what comprehensive plans should aspire to achieve. To those ends, I believe the process should call for plans that:

#### **SIMPLIFY.**

Need to recognize attention spans and design information flow accordingly. There's a LOT of information here, and it needs to be carefully distilled, focused, and honed into content that provides adequate context, then proposes actionable strategies to help citizens and town leaders pursue consensus-based objectives.

#### **ILLUSTRATE.**

Wherever possible, comp plans should leverage informational graphics to emphasize key objectives and the actions necessary to advance them in meaningful, measurable ways.

#### **SUPPORT.**

Every recommendation must be demonstrably aligned with community inputs and clearly evaluated in cost/benefit terms. In order to effect strategies that lead to outcomes, municipalities and comp plan teams need to be able to demonstrate whether towns have the means to achieve articulated objectives. As plans are applied over time, it's essential for municipal officials to acknowledge situations where objectives are beyond reach — and to establish revised objectives that can be attained.

#### **MONITOR and COMMUNICATE.**

The credibility of the comp plan process and its articulated objectives is dependent on the ability to demonstrate its impact. Municipalities have to revisit this process every ten years — and the public needs to be able to see its value in order to legitimize both the effort it requires, and the ongoing commitments it entails.

When municipalities finalize their comp plans, municipalities should evaluate the process to embrace what worked and avoid what didn't — ensuring better outcomes the *next* time around. Transparency via ongoing communication is likely to yield a significant long-term ROI. The more efficient we can make this process, the higher the likelihood of ongoing community engagement and support.

## **MEASURE.**

Wherever possible, plan drafters should provide measurements to gauge progress against objectives. Municipal officials should then continually evaluate and communicate findings, and take steps to recalibrate efforts or identify new objectives as necessary where progress is falling short.

In addition to the highly data-driven comprehensive plan elements required by the GMA, the establishment of growth boundaries presents a particularly vexing challenge for teams tasked with tackling the plan process. As interpreted by most municipalities, growth boundaries are largely binary: you can build *inside* the line, but not *outside*. From a property owner's perspective, these boundaries are ineffective to the point of meaninglessness because they don't accurately portray what more specific town zoning designations actually permit or prohibit.

Because growth boundaries tell an incomplete and often inaccurate story, comprehensive plans should be able to show growth and restricted areas in a more meaningful, accessible way — reflecting the reality that development may be permitted *outside* growth boundaries, and in some instances restricted *within* them.

As a means to make growth areas more accessible and understandable, comprehensive plans could make use of "place types" on growth maps. Designed to illustrate the style and density of development in each area of town, place types help community members to better understand where zoning supports growth and higher density — and where it is subject to tighter controls. Working with defined development concepts like "Suburban Commercial Center," "Downtown," "Town Center," "Village Main Street," and "Rural Crossroads," place types make growth plans easier to visualize, comprehend, and pursue.

Under the current GMA regime, municipalities often spend *years* developing comprehensive plans. As a result, the demands of the process frequently overshadow the product — resulting in a document that often spends more time collecting dust than advancing a shared vision. In concept, the comprehensive planning process — and the plan it produces — is an endeavor well worth a significant commitment of time and resources. But the GMA process, like a comprehensive plan, should evolve and improve to meet its intended objectives.