

Benjamin Meader
Resident of South Bristol, Maine
LD 1940

My name is Ben Meader and I work as a Geospatial Analyst and Environmental Planner in coastal Maine. I grew up and have lived in rural Maine for most of my life. I have had the privilege of working in a variety of capacities on half a dozen Comp Plans with Maine communities over the past decade; this experience has shown me both sides of what makes the GMA both necessary and yet difficult for our municipalities. My experience has been primarily as a mapping and analytics consultant; I've worked for both proponents and opponents to the bill to which I'm testifying, LD 1940. I believe both sides are operating in good faith. I'm personally writing in support of this bill to amend the GMA.

The purpose of a plan is to promote good, collective action by consensus. There are thousands of active plans, and many hundreds of ways to go about creating them. In Maine, our personal lives are affected by plans every day: from the shopping list on your fridge, all the way to the directives of "Maine Won't Wait." The power such plans is always the same. They can only be realized if they are: 1) efficiently created, 2) easily understood, 3) adopted by consensus, 4) acted on in a timely manner, and 5) measurably achieved. The shopping list, for instance, needs a pencil, to be written in words, agreed upon by the cohabitants, done before Sunday afternoon, with a receipt to prove you got everything.

The spirit of the GMA, I believe, is that requiring communities to go through this process will help them prepare for coming changes. If it is not required, so the thinking goes, then perhaps many small communities would never embark on such an undertaking. And it follows that, if you require communities to go through this process, then you'd better give them a "pencil" — meaning there should be guidelines for establishing a baseline of quality. I agree; I believe that requiring some type of planning process is correct and well-placed, as well as providing guidelines for undertaking the process. But I also think we're over-prescribing.

The problem I've witnessed is that the current GMA causes communities to get lost in the existing conditions and methods. Consultants or staff use lots of resources to mime out what is stipulated, perhaps without always seeing bigger picture of why they are doing so: to establish a plan for how their town should address land use. Many other things go into a plan — but the core purpose is always tied back to growth and how to manage it.

Yes, we can keep doing good work if this law remains unchanged. But if it isn't working well, why not tweak it and try something else? And if that doesn't work well, why not change it again later? I think the damage of stagnation and status quo outweigh the unknowns. Comp Planning is costly. I believe the proposed amendments will actually help smaller towns by allowing them to more efficiently define what they need for each of their own plans.

But I support this bill mostly because I support good, innovative planning. I believe we'll be able to do more of that if we amend what is on the books. So why wait? We've had great minds working on this for years now. Let's try something new.

Thanks for your time.