

Sarah Ann Smith
Hope, Maine
LD 2158

Regarding LD 2158:

My name is Sarah Ann Smith. I am a citizen of Hope and have been on the Select Board for nine years: during that time I was Vice Chair (2 years I think) and am currently Chair (about four + years), so I am familiar with town and county government, in addition to my experience as a Legislative Assistant to a Congressman and 14 years as a US Foreign Service Officer (diplomat) . I write today in my citizen role and am not speaking for the Select Board or Town of Hope Since I am from away, I have been astounded at what passes for “County Government” in rural Maine compared to the robust county government structures in other states.

As far as I have been able to determine, the only functions Knox County performs are:

- Emergency Dispatch Center
- Emergency Preparedness
- Sheriff’s Department (which provides the only police for most of the small towns)
- County Jail (currently effectively not functioning)

At the moment, our dispatch is via Waldo County and our prisoners are at Two Bridges in Lincoln County because of the multiple-year crisis in county government.

The current disaster that is Knox County government is a symptom of a state-wide crisis and problem for rural counties where competent leadership, meaning both the Administrator and the elected county commissioners, is scarce. There are simply not enough capable, educated-in-county-government people to run for and hold positions that are part-time and poorly paid (the commissioners) or be fairly compensated for a full-time position (a trained-for-the-job county administrator). Further, there is no oversight whatsoever of what the county does by either the member towns or the citizens. The three elected commissioners can decide what they want, and no matter how much towns and citizens protest their decisions, they do it anyway. In turn, this adversely affects every taxpayer.

That problem will not be solved in the short run. For now, however, it is essential that the entirety of Knox County have continued 911 emergency services and a sheriff’s department. Without approval of this emergency bill, that is what will happen because the County cannot muster a quorum because of staffing shortages and people who have left the sinking ship.

In the longer run, the state needs to review the entire structure of government in Maine. It’s possible the large counties in southern Maine function well, but in rural Maine, it’s a hot mess. Knox has been unable to recruit and retain competent employees and elected commissioners for years, which is what has landed us in this pickle. I expect that other counties are facing similar problems including the ever-escalating costs with no ability for the member towns to have any oversight or control if the county government is failing.

The school system is likewise flawed and requires a state-wide re-set. Unless a town has substantial business or tourist tax income, the entire burden of the ever-escalating costs falls on property owners. In Hope, 79-80 percent of the town budget is for the elementary school and our share of the regional high school. The roads and plowing budget take up a huge amount of the remaining 20 percent. In the 15 years I have lived in Hope, our property taxes have doubled, but our income has most definitely not. The current system causes undue burden on rural property owners, unlike cities and big towns (in the south plus Bangor area).

These systemic flaws are exacerbated by the smaller pool of people in rural Maine who can run for office and fill the jobs with the needed experience. These issues are what have led to the need for today’s bill.

Today, I encourage you to pass this bill and allow Knox County to limp along.

Tomorrow, I ask that you begin to address statewide systemic problems in the structure of government, how emergency services are handled (need for regionalization, coordination, less duplication of functions by underfunded towns), and how schools are funded so that the escalating costs do not drive people out of their homes, towns and our wonderful state.

Thank you.

Sarah Ann Smith, Hope, Maine