



**Appropriations & Financial Affairs Committee
Housing & Economic Development Committee**

February 19, 2026

Chairs Rotundo and Gattine, Chairs Curry and Gere, and distinguished members of the Committees:

My name is Johanna Johnston. I serve as Executive Director of the Southern Aroostook Development Corporation, representing rural communities along the I-95 corridor and Maine’s northern border. I am here in opposition to Part EE of LD 2212, which would redirect \$700,000 from Maine’s Tourism Marketing Promotion Fund.

For rural regions like Southern Aroostook, tourism marketing is not optional — it is essential infrastructure. We do not have large convention centers or cruise ports. What we have are rivers, lakes, trail systems, working forests, wildlife, and authentic small-town experiences. We depend heavily on statewide marketing to reach visitors we cannot reach on our own.

The Tourism Marketing Fund was created in 2001 to ensure that 5% of the meals and lodging tax — generated by tourism businesses themselves — is reinvested directly into promoting Maine. That model has provided stability and consistency, which are critical in a competitive tourism landscape.

The Maine Office of Tourism reports that for every \$1 invested in marketing, approximately \$15–\$20 in visitor spending is generated. In rural economies, that return on investment has outsized impact.

I recently attended the Maine Outdoor Economy Summit in Portland, where industry leaders emphasized several key trends:

- Canadian visitation has softened and remains uncertain.
- Travelers are booking closer to departure dates.
- Drive markets are increasingly important.
- Visitors are seeking authentic, outdoor, small-town experiences.
- Shoulder-season growth is essential for business stability.

In border communities like ours, shifts in cross-border economic conditions, currency valuation, and broader macroeconomic uncertainty directly impact visitation patterns. These are factors outside Maine’s control. What *is* within Maine’s control is maintaining consistent, competitive marketing investment.

Testimony Opposing Part EE of LD 2212



Next month, we will host the Outdoor Adventure Summit in Island Falls, focused on helping entrepreneurs and communities capture growth in Maine’s outdoor recreation economy. The energy is strong. Interest is growing. But these rural businesses operate on narrow margins. They rely on consistent statewide marketing to bring awareness and traffic north.

When statewide marketing visibility weakens:

- Fewer visitors discover lesser-known rural destinations.
- Booking volume drops quickly.
- Seasonal staff hours are reduced.
- Entrepreneurs delay investment.
- Momentum slows.

I also speak as a small tourism business owner. I recently launched a kayak rental company serving the Meduxnekeag River and nearby lakes. Businesses like mine depend on Maine’s statewide brand strength. When Maine markets itself successfully, rural communities benefit from that halo effect.

I understand the difficult budget decisions facing this Legislature and the pressures on the General Fund. However, the Tourism Marketing Promotion Fund was intentionally structured as a dedicated reinvestment model — funded by the industry itself — precisely so it would not fluctuate with General Fund pressures. Redirecting these dollars undermines a model that has worked for more than two decades and risks weakening one of Maine’s highest-return economic investments.

If reductions must be considered, I respectfully suggest they be drawn from areas not directly tied to economic return generation. Tourism marketing is not simply an expense line — it is a revenue multiplier and an economic development tool.

For Southern Aroostook, tourism is more than hospitality. It supports:

- Small lodging properties and restaurants
- Outdoor recreation guides and outfitters
- Downtown revitalization efforts
- Workforce stability during shoulder seasons
- Future attraction of residents and remote workers

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Tourism is often the first introduction someone has to our region. Without sustained marketing, fewer people discover us — and fewer choose to return.

Now, particularly during a period of competitive pressure and visitation uncertainty, is the time to reinforce Maine's marketing strength — not diminish it.

I respectfully urge you to oppose Part EE of LD 2212 and protect Maine's Tourism Marketing Promotion Fund.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to Maine's economic vitality.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Johanna Johnston
Executive Director
Southern Aroostook Development Corporation