

Senator Mazurek, Representative Theriault and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation, I am David Milan, Economic Development Director for the Town of Bucksport and on behalf of the Bucksport Town Council, I am here today to testify against LD 1804.

Prior to my present position with the town, I retired as the Deputy Chief of Police with 26 years of law enforcement service. Because the Penobscot River serves as the divider for Waldo and Hancock counties, and because each of their respectful county seats ( and hence Sheriff departments) are located 18 miles away, the Bucksport Police Department was often called upon to respond to possible jumpers on the historic Waldo / Hancock Bridge. During my law enforcement career, I personally have talked more people off of the Waldo / Hancock Bridge than anyone else. In addition to my law enforcement career, I was also intimately involved in the design and construction of the new Penobscot Narrows Bridge and Observatory. I served as the Chairman of the MDOT Public Advisory Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Waldo / Hancock Bridge which ultimately led to the construction of the new bridge. This committee spent 6 years trying to preserve the former historic bridge and then helping to design another historic bridge that was built right next to it.

I mention all of this simply to say that I fully understand why this bill is before you today and why the authors feel it is their responsibility to do something about the number of folks who have taken their lives by jumping from the new Penobscot Narrows Bridge. As a former DARE Officer, I taught in the classroom of the most recent person who jumped from the bridge. She was an excellent teacher, she was a role model for our young students and she is missed very much by her community.

Though the numbers certainly can vary greatly from year to year, on average, 160 Mainers lose their life to suicide each year. The highest suicide rates, at 23.8 per 100,000 of population, are among the oldest members of Maine's population; those over 85 years of age. In sheer numbers, the highest number of suicides, 51%, between 2002-2006, occurred among those between the ages of 35-59.

In that same study, the method of suicide by jumping from a high structure is grouped together in "All Other" category which accounts for only 8% of the total. In other words, the miscellaneous section.

With this method of taking one's life accounting for such a small percentage of the whole, one might ask why we are leading the fight to reduce suicides by spending a million dollars in the "miscellaneous section". Could public funds be better spent in a manner that would have a more substantial impact on this devastating issue? Please do not misconstrue my comments and assume that I feel any one method of suicide deserves more attention than the others. To the contrary, I believe that with such limited funds available for prevention and education that we should look at any strategy that will have the best results and address ALL methods of suicide.

So why are we talking about placing fences along bridges to help reduce suicides? I believe that I can tell you why. It's because those events are reported in the news every single time they occur. During my law enforcement career, I stopped counting how many times I responded to self-inflicted gunshot wounds. Or an almost equally amount of hangings. Even when the person involved was of a notable reputation, the cause of death was very very rarely ever reported in the press. Even the car crashes that were proven to be intentional acts, aren't reported as such. And frankly, I am very glad that they are not reported on. Findings from numerous American and international studies during the last thirty years indicate the likelihood of copycat suicides are increased by certain types of reporting. The classic cases are the increase in the national suicide rate by 17% after Marilyn Monroe died by suicide and the international copycat suicides after Kurt Cobain's death. There are actual guidelines for the media on how to report on these types of events. I offer to you today that if you were to hear news reports, like you hear when a tragedy occurs on the Penobscot Narrows Bridge, every time a person dies from hanging, which is 20% (not some number less than 8%) of the total number of occurrences in the State of Maine, we would be standing here today discussing a bill to reduce the tensile strength of rope.

I have intentionally refrained from talking about the esthetics of a fence on this historic structure. I have refrained because I feel that suicide is a very important issue to the citizens of

the state and to minimize the issue by comparing it to simple esthetics would be doing the issue a disservice.

I have also intentionally refrained from discussing any possible impact of such a fence on reducing the number of suicides. I have read an equal number of studies and reports that have completely opposite conclusions as to the usefulness of such fencing. I have read letters to the editors and presentations from current and retired mental health professionals from around North America that also, each declare to have the definitive answer to the question as to whether jumpers simply choose another high structure or method. And they too are 180 degrees off from each other.

This bill is simply an emotional answer to a very complex issue by good minded folks who are frustrated by the thought that another human being would consider taking their own life as an answer to the challenges they are facing. A Psychologist once told me when I questioned why a man had taken his life after we spent hours talking with him, he said, "Don't try to rationalize what a person who is acting irrationally is doing".

I propose that rather than spending a million dollars on a fence for one bridge, that we consider spending money on something that is going to have a much greater impact on reducing all methods of suicide, not simply on the miscellaneous section. Maybe like working with journalism schools to educate them on the unintentional impact of a news story.

Thank you and I am prepared to try and answer any questions you may have.