

**Testimony in Support of  
Rural Rental Affordable Housing in the Budget in LD 258**

Hello Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Pierce and Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing.

My name is Joanne Joy, I live in Bowdoinham, ME where I am honored to serve on the Comprehensive Planning Committee as the Chair.

I am here in support of the Rural Rental Program in Budget

I have three points to make today – and a theme – the Rural Rental Program not only helps support rural Mainers today it is an essential component of us planning into the future.

1. The Rental Program is an essential component of keeping and attracting young families and individuals to Bowdoinham as well as to other small towns, so we can thrive. It also supports some older community members to downsize and stay in the town they love. Current rental options are very minimal in our town, representing less than half the rate of rental options across Sagadahoc County and assistance with paying rent and development of rental properties will help us be more inclusive of who finds renting as a better or only option.
2. Housing in the village districts and in the agricultural sections of Bowdoinham, as planned for in the Comprehensive Plan to be approved in 2024, needs to grow in ways that continue to support the rural nature of our community, allow open spaces and agriculture to thrive while increasing the density of housing in the Village. The Rental Program also works to support a diverse population – we have been examining data primarily related to age, and income, in the Comp Planning meetings and in Two Housing Community Conversations in the past few months, but we also know that people from diverse racial, ethnic, immigrant/refugee/asylum seeker status, who identify as LGBTQ+, as well as other identities, also may need the supports afforded by the Rural Rental Program
3. Housing is a human right, an important component of the Social Determinants of Health in that it supports the ability of individuals to go to school, to work or volunteer; to prepare meals and eat healthy foods – maybe have a ‘kitchen garden’, to get out-of-doors to play, work, etc.; to get restful sleep, and I could add more. In my professional role in Public Health, we also know that unhoused and inadequately housed people are more likely to also be food insecure, have at risk for chronic health conditions, miss school or work, etc. Housing is a backbone element that supports and increases the workforce, decreases medical and mental health costs of MaineCare, reduces criminal involvement,

risk of substance use disorder and more. Access to and good housing for all of us can help reduce other budget line items over time.

The Housing Community Conversations in Bowdoinham included diverse voices and quite a few participants – in October over 50 people were in attendance, and just last week during bitter cold, over 30 people provided their input. The priorities were clear –

- Focus on both increased housing/ rentals for younger families and individuals, and increase smaller housing units so older community members can downsize and stay in town. At the moment about 1/3 of Bowdoinham people are ages 60-69 and the 0-9 year-olds cohort is the largest we have seen in decades. All other population age cohorts are smaller than state averages. These two age groups have helped to inform our age-related focus re: the housing needs for the future. As I noted above, these two groups are likely users of the Rural Rental Program
- What do small rural towns need? Bowdoinham community members prioritize investigating and approving modifications to local land use ordinances to both -
  - Increase housing density in the village – where water is accessible via the Bowdoinham Water District, where joint septic solutions can be considered, and the town facilities are available – the beloved Library, Merrymeeting Hall, etc.
  - Plan for modifications also in the agricultural areas – to support options like cluster housing, or modest developments on a smaller portion of land when the majority of the property remains in open space. Consideration for our seasonal workforce – in Bowdoinham people who work on our farms – is also vital.

I would be remiss if I did not close by reinforcing the public health comments – housing supports our economic development and stability both locally in across the state, as well as our families, our workforce, and our health.

Bowdoinham's planning and focus on meeting diverse housing needs continues – and we hope that the Rural Rental Program will be a robust element in our discussions and solutions.

Thank you for all the good work you are doing – both in your Standing Committees and on the Select Committee on Housing.

If you have questions – I may be able to answer some and I believe there may be others in attendance with deeper understanding of the intricacies of funding.

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