



March 20, 2023

Senator Henry Ingwersen, Chair
Representative Bill Pluecker, Chair
Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
Cross Office Building, Room 214
Augusta, Maine 04333

Re: L.D. 988, Resolve, Directing the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to Conduct an Accessibility Study of All Maine State Parks and Historic Sites and to Develop a Plan to Remove Access Barriers

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

My name is Keenan Weischedel and I am an advocate at Disability Rights Maine, Maine's Protection and Advocacy agency for people with disabilities, testifying in support of LD 988 on behalf of DRM and the clients we serve. I'm an avid outdoorsman who spends my free time mountain biking, exploring accessible nature trails, and playing wheelchair rugby, including spending last week in Alabama trying out for Team USA. I'm also a quadriplegic as the result of a spinal cord injury from a skiing accident.

LD 988 would require Maine to conduct an accessibility study covering each of Maine's 48 state parks and historic sites to identify barriers to physical and program accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Following the study, LD 988 would require the development of a remediation plan to systematically remove access barriers. DRM fully

160 Capitol Street, Suite 4, Augusta, ME 04330

207.626.2774 • 1.800.452.1948 • Fax: 207.621.1419 • drme.org

supports this proposal and would like to thank Senator Daughtry for bringing this forward.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed over 32 years ago, and was based on congressional findings that individuals with disabilities continually encounter various forms of discrimination, *including the discriminatory effects of architectural barriers and the failure to make modifications to existing facilities and practices*. But people with disabilities continue to face significant barriers in accessing Maine's state parks and historic sites.

The last time Maine conducted a survey similar to the one LD 988 would require was in 1996. And the report stated that the findings would be used “as guidelines for future detailed design and implementation of accessibility measures, and for the formulation of long-range improvements budgets and funding requests.”¹ Unfortunately, increasing accessibility has not been an ongoing priority.² And many barriers remain.

Last year, I was part of a team at Disability Rights Maine that visited a number of State Parks to get a sense of existing barriers. Some parks had some excellent accessibility features – allowing access to beaches, trails and lakes. And others lacked basic accessibility features. Most were a mix of the two. Using footage from these visits, DRM created a video to highlight the need for more accessible outdoor spaces. It is currently featured on the front page of our website – www.drme.org. I hope you will take 5 minutes to watch it.³

¹ See: Maine State Parks and Historic Sites ADA Accessibility Study (1996).

² See: Fleming, Deidre, “Maine lags in providing state park access to people with disabilities”, Portland Press Herald, 11/12/2017, available at: <https://www.pressherald.com/2017/11/12/maine-lags-in-providing-state-park-access-to-people-with-disabilities/>

³ The video, Accessible Outdoors, is also available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLG4cwUoqbg>

Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

March 20, 2023

Page 3

LD 988 would ensure that people with disabilities are involved at every stage in the process. That is a vital aspect of this bill, because people with disabilities should be involved in identifying and prioritizing the removal of access barriers. While we understand that the State is using some recent federal funding to increase accessibility at state parks and we applaud those efforts, we are concerned that people with disabilities were not sufficiently involved in that process.

At this point, in 2023, we are not asking for accessible bathrooms or parking areas – all that should be an absolute given. What people with disabilities want is access to the same things that draw everyone to Maine’s parks – access to views, fresh air, and physical activity.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony in support of LD 988.

Respectfully,

Keenan Weischedel

Advocate

Disability Rights Maine