

Maine Voices: Restoring original Maine flag is the right idea – just maybe not right now

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By Chris Korzen

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The Legislature is once again considering proposals to restore Maine’s original flag, the 1901-vintage pine-tree-and-star banner that has experienced a tremendous resurgence in recent years. The case for bringing back this flag is strong, but it’s a move we should only make when Mainers of all stripes are on board.

I know a few things about “the pine and star.” Five years ago, Maine Flag Company – which I co-founded and co-own with my business partner Bethany Field – took a chance and began making then-obscure original Maine flags in our Portland sewing shop. We had a hunch that Mainers would embrace the old design once they found out about it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The response was instantaneous and overwhelming, so much so that within just a few weeks we shifted most of our business to 1901 flag production in order to meet demand, and spun off a new brand promoting the flag on hats, t-shirts and other merchandise. Other companies followed our lead and began sporting the flag on products of their own. Mainers voted with their flagpoles, and the once-forgotten standard has quickly become an enduring symbol of our state.

Citizens and tourists alike love the flag’s simplicity and distinctiveness. Many prefer it to the current flag, which from a distance is difficult to distinguish from those of many other states.

The original flag’s symbols also matter. The star represents the state motto – “Dirigo,” Latin for “I lead” – a nod to Maine’s outsized national influence. The pine evokes Maine’s economic strength and natural beauty.

But Maine's current official flag (the blue one featuring the state seal) is also loaded with important symbols, and the movement to replace it comes during a period of unprecedented economic and social change. That flag's most prominent features – a farmer and a sailor – represent economic mainstays that many feel face inundation by the tides of history.

It is against this backdrop that we must ask whether this is really the right time to change our flag.

Many believe the answer is “no.” The Legislature's proposal became a talk-radio punching bag, and social media erupted in fury the last two times it came up for consideration.

In 2019, Rep. Will Tuell of East Machias told fellow lawmakers that he got “an earful” from constituents who asked whether the Legislature had better things to do using what he described as “colorful language.” Around the same time I myself was dressed down for my role in bringing back the original flag by a Peaks Island bar patron whose family had fished Casco Bay for generations. Things were hard enough for them, she said. Why did I want to inflict further indignity by “taking us off the flag?”

These voices deserve to be heard.

And those who believe our elected leaders have more pressing priorities are right. Restoring the original flag's official status will do very little to address the urgent challenges facing our state. It won't end the opioid crisis, bring back the paper mills, lower inflation, or make housing affordable again. And at a time when cultural divides appear wider and deeper than ever, a change to the state flag hardly promises to bring people together. In fact, if done wrong it will have exactly the opposite effect.

Those like me who love the original Maine flag should keep on flying it. And if the Legislature perceives a groundswell of support for the pine and star from all corners of Maine, then by all means it should make the switch. But let's keep in mind that a flag that does not fly as a symbol of unity cannot fulfill its intended purpose. As much of a good idea as bringing back the pine and star may be, it's something we should only do when we're ready to do it together.

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