

April 4, 2023

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share my support of LD 536--An Act to Provide Natural Organic Reduction Facilities for Maine Residents for the Conversion of Human Remains to Soil-- with you today.

My name is Polly Shyka. I grew up in Orrington and I now live and work in Freedom. My husband and I own Villageside Farm where we grow organic seedlings and vegetables for midcoast Maine. I am also an agricultural consultant and I am on the Spiritual Care Team at Inland Hospital in Waterville, where I serve ill and dying patients. I am studying to be a hospice and/or hospital chaplain.

I'd like to talk a bit about soil and soil organic matter for my time with you this morning...and hopefully inspire you to see compost as an absolutely incredible gift to leave the earth and life on earth.

Natural organic reduction is, just as the words say, a natural and organic process where microbes that have co-evolved with terrestrial life over millions of years get to do their good work of reducing life forms to basic components.

Some of these components are nutrients, meaning they can be taken up by plants and fungi and used in their growth, but some of these components are what farmers and soil scientists call soil organic matter. Soil organic matter gives soil its structure. It is the matrix-- between rock fragments, water and air molecules.

Simply put, many human actions destroy soil structure and soil organic matter, and composting is one of the few that creates it.

Dr. Robert Parnes writes in Fertile Soil that

"The most important benefit of organic residues is their effect on soil structure. Substitutes exist for all other benefits; for example we could spread commercial fertilizer and spray commercial pesticides...there is however, no practical way to produce a stable soil structure without organic residues." (Parnes, Robert, PhD. (1990) *Fertile Soil*. Davis, California: agAccess.p. 22)

Compost and soil are incredible substances. In this tablespoon of soil from my farm fields there are more microbes than there are humans on earth. Billions.

Some would say humans have created a lot of damage, cooked up multiple global crises in the last few thousand years. Clearly, there is not one answer to the predicament we are in.

We must discuss and make changes on one hundred, one thousand, no, really, **ten** thousand, different issues. We must piece together our understanding and try ten thousand new ideas and solutions in order for life on earth to continue. Like the best innovations, in my opinion, NOR takes its cues from nature and natural processes.

NOR is one innovation we can try. This process uses far less fossil fuel, hardwoods, steel, concrete and polluting chemicals than cemetery burial. Compared to cremation, NOR is net zero in carbon dioxide emissions.

Let's follow Washington state's and a growing number of other states' lead and bring this option to Maine.

I am very hopeful that LD 536 will make a clear, smooth path for this disposition choice to be added to the other options like burial and cremation in Maine.

As a chaplain-to-be I understand and respect that each person has their own needs and desires for their end of life and after death decisions. I am not against other forms of disposition but I am very, **very** much FOR the addition of Natural Organic Reduction as a choice for me, my neighbors, my children and family and thereby all Mainers.

I urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD536 in its current form and I look forward to hearing any questions you may have of me or other advocates. Thank you for your time and consideration and for serving our state in all of the ways that you do.

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