



## Department of Defense, Veterans and Emergency Management

### Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services

117 State House Station, Augusta, Maine 04333-0117  
Phone (207) 287-7020 Fax (207) 626-4471

March 30, 2023

Nether for nor against:

*LD 1375, "An Act to Provide Funding for a Chapel at the Maine Veterans' Memorial Cemetery in Auguata"*

Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs. I'm David Richmond, Director of the Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services and I'm here today to testify neither for nor against LD 1375, "An Act to Provide Funding for a Chapel at the Maine Veterans' Memorial Cemetery in Augusta."

While we appreciate the intent to improve services at our Augusta cemetery, we are committed to follow and maintain the high standards and expectations set by the Department of Veterans Affairs, National Cemetery Administration, and also honor past relationships between the state and the regional non-profit cemetery associations, that each of our cemeteries benefit from.

Each of our veterans' cemeteries include one Committal Service Shelter which is funded by the VA. Each of these open, covered pavilions provide a quiet structure, set in the terrain with trees and vegetation, with the intention of providing temporary shelter from the rain and sun, and limited protection from the wind, for an interment service of fifteen to twenty minutes. A family may choose a committal service under the shelter if they are concerned about the impact of the weather at a grave-side service—but either choice is designed as a final committal lasting a short time, often after a funeral elsewhere.

Our regional non-profit cemetery associations fill a very important role for our state veterans' cemeteries. They raise money for beatification projects and enhancements to the facilities that are outside of what the state or the VA has provided for operation—but still very important to visitors. When the associations propose a project, there is a design review, approval from the state, and the associations place money in escrow to maintain the project in perpetuity.

In addition, our cemetery associations have pursued through fundraising efforts, to make improvements to existing structures. For example, the association in Caribou, proposed an enhancement to the shelter there that includes doors and three walls of

store front windows to block the prevailing winds. They raised nearly one hundred thousand dollars to do this and have provided a meaningful enhancement to the facility that had a direct effect on our mutual customers. The Southern Maine Veterans' Cemetery is currently engaged in a similar project and have also raised the funding on their own.

The structure that is the focus of this bill was an appreciated feature of the original Maine Veterans Memorial Cemetery, but it also provided many lessons learned on planning for future maintenance and contributed to the current policy of approving and accepting new projects. The original Father LeClair chapel was designed and built using funds raised by volunteers in excess of five hundred thousand dollars. The building had a 44-year service life, cut short due to water intrusion from multiple points in the building envelope and the transition of its flat roof, and its walls that rose above the roof. Leaks also came from the original flat aggregate roof, that was replaced by a membrane roof, which in time, also failed. The roof was ultimately covered with a sloped metal roof. Unknown to all though, was that the water intrusion at several points over the years, caused a serious mold problem. After extensive study by an engineering firm, it was determined that the cost to remediate the damage, far exceeded the cost of a new building. In 2018, the cemetery system retained a contractor to demolish the structure and stabilize the site, and also applied for and received a federal grant for the construction of a committal shelter similar to the other shelters in the cemetery system; that construction took place around the same time.

The Bureau has reservations regarding this bill for a couple of reasons. First, the possible unintended consequence this may create, such as establishing a precedent of funding through the Legislature for purchases and obligations beyond recommendations of the VA; in particular, a precedent in funding a structure that the other regional associations do not have—and have all raised money to address on their own. Second is the amount of money proposed in the bill. Without scoping the project and establishing a concept design, we do not have enough information to determine if the proposed funding is sufficient to cover design, construction and perpetual maintenance costs. If passed and in order to avoid previous mistakes, funding should be placed in a non-lapsing interest bearing account to accommodate current and future maintenance.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

David Richmond  
Director, Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services