

Testimony In Support of LD 460, *An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Improve Student Success and Workforce Readiness Within the University of Maine System*
From Lara Chern, University of Maine Student
April 26, 2023

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Appropriations & Financial Affairs Committee: My name is Lara Chern and I live in Orono, though I am a native of New Hampshire. I am proud to be sitting before you today as the 2023 University of Maine valedictorian. I will be graduating with a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering and work as a project manager at UMaine's Advanced Structures and Composites Center, known as ASCC. I am here to speak today in support of LD 460, the \$100 million infrastructure bond for the University of Maine System.

I have been fortunate in my time in Orono to receive valuable opportunities for my career growth within the engineering and project management disciplines. I have worked in a vast majority of the engineering laboratories on campus, most notably the ASCC. As you walk through the laboratory space, it is evident that the steep increase in project activities given our growing national and international leadership in advanced and additive manufacturing research and development has outgrown the space that currently exists. Equipment is overbooked, causing severe project schedule delays, as I have personally experienced on multiple projects that I manage.

With previous, gracious, public funding such as the bond that I am here to speak for today and debt service, UMaine was able to open the Ferland Engineering Education and Design Center. I have been fortunate enough to be able to see first-hand the advantages that this improvement of infrastructure has done for not only the engineering department, but the campus as a whole. Classroom spaces have been modernized and the building has become a central hub for the university's admissions team. Students are now able to get real experience in multiple labs that cater to a myriad of opportunities. Ferland is in stark contrast to the rest of the campus where students are met by old, outdated, and far less inviting spaces than the newly constructed pride of campus.

LD 460 would invest \$58 million at my soon-to-be alma mater, including to support the construction of the Green Engineering and Materials Factory of the Future. Once the building is complete, I hope to return to UMaine to work on the large portfolio of projects this new space will support. Without this expansion, the rapid growth of the learning opportunities that this world-class R&D center provides for the students and future innovators and leaders in the Maine workforce will not meet its full potential.

The Factory of the Future will allow ASCC to not only help modernize our campus and draw new talent to the state, but also help Maine's R1 flagship tap further into the growing markets of Green Energy Materials. This ambitious project will create paid training opportunities to 400+ workers per year in manufacturing technologies and operations. The new facility will also help to develop a future workforce of engineers that understand the quality and breadth of opportunity available in this state. Enhancements in facilities such as these create a cultivating environment for young engineers to want to continue their future careers in the state. This is an investment not just in a building, but also Maine students, the future Maine workforce and our economy and ability to solve big problems, like the need for affordable housing and climate innovations.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today for your continued support of Maine's public universities, including the Advanced Structures and Composites Center. I look forward to answering your questions.