



## **Testimony in Support of LD 1156**

**“An Act to Authorize a General Fund Bond Issue to Promote the Design, Development and Maintenance of Trails for Outdoor Recreation and Active Transportation”**

April 27, 2023

Brent West, Executive Director

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, my name is Brent West. I am a resident of Readfield and am here today on behalf of the High Peaks Alliance (HPA). The mission of HPA is to ensure and enhance access and recreational opportunities in western Maine’s High Peaks region. I am testifying in support of LD 1156.

I have come today to ask you to allow the Maine people a chance to vote on a bond to fund trails. When I grew up in New Portland, I would stand outside the local dowel mill waiting for the bus. I still remember when that mill closed. I rode the school bus with the children of the workers who walked into that mill for the last time. After the mill closed, the elementary school was close to follow. Forest products are still a large part of our economy in the region, but as we look to our future, the outdoor recreation industry gives us hope. The issue is complicated by the fact that as the mills closed, the land was sold to investment groups. The local connection to the land in too many instances has been cut off. As Maine faces a demographic cliff, the land transfers accelerate.

The Androscoggin Valleys Council of Government’s 2023-2028 development strategy states; “Our shared vision for western Maine is a place of sustained quality and natural beauty, where an abundance of clean lakes, river valleys, mountains, farmland, forests, and trails frame our communities and offer an exceptional residential and business environment.” This document outlines the top four strengths of this region as recreation, love of the region, forest products, and tourism.

Maine people want access and trails. 70% of Mainers participate in outdoor recreation and 41% of housing in our region is recreational or seasonal. We have money to continue to promote

these places, but we don't have adequate funds to maintain them. Maine has no dedicated trail funding available to match the federal funds coming from the Recreational Trails Program or the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Additionally, Lands for Maine's Future has conserved some of our most special places, but has no money to ensure access to these lands. The Bureau of Parks and Lands has no staff to perform trail building or maintenance on many popular trails in our region. The Snowmobile and ATV clubs are using personal equipment and cobbling enough funding to make it work, but it is a not sustainable.

Trails are no longer just a bonus for our communities. Trails are a key investment to attract and retain an able workforce to our communities. There are 60 million people within a 12-hour drive of Maine, and is the same geography where people are moving from. The Maine state economist indicates this is the region where our only population growth is originating from. In our region, we are estimated to lose 20% of our working age population by 2030. It is important that we make investments that will bring new blood to rural Maine and keep them here.

I would just ask that you consider before you vote, to speak with the people you serve and ask if they would like a chance to vote on this important investment opportunity this fall.

Thank you,

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