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**Testimony of Nancy Smith, CEO of GrowSmart Maine  
In Support of LD 1673 An Act to Encourage Affordable Housing and  
Mixed-use Development by Establishing a Thriving Corridors Program**

May 12, 2023

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere and Honorable Members of the Joint Select  
Committee on Housing,

My name is Nancy Smith, I live in Ellsworth, and I am the CEO of GrowSmart Maine. We are a statewide non-partisan non-profit organization helping communities navigate change in alignment with smart growth. We advocate for comprehensive policies and funding for smart growth practices and outcomes.

We have partnered with Build Maine to guide a transparent crowd-sourcing of policy proposals that began a year ago, and has drawn together over a hundred people from across Maine and beyond. [Policy Action 2023](#) has resulted in sixteen proposals from eight working groups, all addressing the shared goal, ***“to address barriers to and create incentives for equitable, sustainable growth and development that strengthens downtowns and villages of all sizes while pulling development pressure away from productive and open natural areas. We do so acknowledging that Maine has urban, rural, and suburban settings for which any solution may or may not be a fit and a variety of people who deserve to be welcomed to their communities.”***

LD 1673 is one of the most exciting of the Policy Action 2023 proposals because it is here that we directly address the interdependence between traffic patterns and road design with land use policy and patterns. If we are to facilitate the reuse of aging commercial strips as thriving corridors of mixed use development that include housing, transportation and land use must be considered together.

This bill encourages new investment along existing public infrastructure to support the municipal tax base in areas that often see significant retail turnover and that are largely underutilized. This includes ending the practice of mandating off-street parking spaces, which hollows out communities, drives up the cost of development, and prevents valuable land from being used for higher and better uses, such as housing.

I will take this opportunity to share with you a set of case studies GrowSmart Maine developed about ten years ago; [Implementing the Vision: First Step Practical Steps to Transform Commercial Strips Into Mixed-Use Centers](#)

With examples from ten Maine communities, this resource answered the question of whether commercial strips in the small town environment such as we find in Maine can be retrofitted to meet

the needs of both property owners and the public. One example we are all familiar with in our drive to and from the Capitol, is the Augusta Plaza, or KMart Plaza as it was commonly referred to then. This study begins on page 52 of the report. "Transforming Commercial Strips into Mixed-Use Centers" lays out real examples of the potential for creating thriving corridors.

LD 1673 puts in place a program to encourage this kind of redevelopment. The Thriving Corridors Program is voluntary for municipalities, which can apply for State funds to meet the qualifying criteria.

The critical part of this proposal is the incentives, including preferential consideration for MaineDOT capital funding, Maine State Housing Authority funding for affordable housing and mixed-use projects, which will spur robust interest from developers for this kind of redevelopment. Why can't communities just do this now? Because it's complicated and requires both resources to make it happen, and funding incentives to encourage municipalities to lean in and change their usual practice.

The attached Fact Sheet outlines the intent of the bill as well as the benefits of creating the Thriving Corridors Program. These benefits include:

- facilitating creation of new housing units, including affordable housing, close to service centers, jobs, and social networks
- creating safer streets by replacing stop-and-go traffic that fluctuates between too fast and too slow with more consistent, slower flow movement that is safe for everyone and less frustrating for drivers.
- drawing development to under-utilized commercial strips unlocks significant development potential in communities of all sizes across Maine. Directing incentives to these areas is an efficient way to create significant economic activity.
- drawing development pressure away from open and productive lands where natural resource enterprises represent the "highest and best use."

I am excited by the potential of this proposal, and am eager to work with the Committee in any way that is helpful to you.

