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Testimony of Berwick Community Media, Terri Wright, Director

In Support of LD 1967, An Act To Support Municipal Franchise Agreements

Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology

October 12, 2023

Senator Lawrence, Representative Ziegler and members of the Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology.

Berwick Community Media (BCM) is submitting testimony today as a member of Maine Community Media Association and as a local public access station that delivers information and resources to our community. We know the provisions in LD 1967, "An Act To Support Municipal Franchise Agreements" will provide assistance to municipalities and public access stations in Maine.

Berwick Community Media is a Public, Educational and Government (PEG) station. We air and stream government meetings, nonprofit and school events, as well as informational videos by Town departments and local organizations. BCM assisted in the creation of this legislation because we have experienced some of the problems addressed in this bill.

BCM has provided meaningful information and resources to our community since 2012. We were front line during COVID sending out locations and information on services, business openings, and of course vaccination sites. We pivoted quickly, finding ways to offer remote meetings online and opportunities for residents to stay involved. As the pandemic eased, we were one of the first stations in Maine to offer hybrid meetings.

In 2018, we re-negotiated our contract with Comcast. One of our goals was to see the final two roads in Berwick cabled. We were told that both roads did not meet the density requirements for extension. The Town of Berwick and BCM gave up \$40,000 from our negotiated capital improvement grant to finish wiring these roads. Our hope is that the line extension language in this bill will help other communities expand their coverage area without requiring additional funds from grants and/or capital monies set aside for roads or other municipal projects.

We would also like our programs to be shown in High Definition (HD). Everything we produce is created in HD. However, when it goes out on either of our two channels, it resembles a program produced in the 50's or 60's. When we asked about going out in HD, we were told that we would have to pay to upgrade their equipment and then a monthly fee would be charged. This bill will address the loophole video service providers found in Public Law 245, "An Act to Ensure Nondiscriminatory Treatment of Public, Educational and Governmental Access Channels by Cable System Operators."

As a Maine Community Media Association member, I know this bill has gone through multiple sources for input. This includes the Governor's office, the Maine Municipal Association, the Attorney General's office, The Public Utilities Commission, and public access stations in Maine. We wanted to ensure that the bill addressed municipal concerns that could be resolved through mediation rather than expensive legal venues. Municipalities have limited resources and fighting cable companies is low on the priority list. This bill retains local control of franchise provisions, and it establishes a dispute resolution process for franchise agreements thus avoiding lengthy and costly legal actions.

Please support LD 1967, An Act to Support Municipal Franchise Agreements.

Sincerely,

Terri Wright, Director
Berwick Community Media