



Committee on Housing  
% Legislative Information Office  
100 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333

January 9, 2023

**RE: LD 602, An Act to Provide Regional Support to Deliver State and Federal Programs to Cities and Towns in the State**

Dear Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Members of the Housing Committee:

My name is Francesca “Ches” Gundrum and I am Maine Audubon’s Policy Advocate. Maine Audubon is a wildlife conservation non-profit – we fulfill our mission to “conserve Maine’s wildlife and wildlife habitat” by engaging people of all ages in nature through a science-based approach to education, conservation, and advocacy. On behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members, supporters, and volunteers, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 602, *An Act to Provide Regional Support to Deliver State and Federal Programs to Cities and Towns in the State*.

As Maine grapples with a lack of housing and a growing population, the importance of judicious land use planning where we strive to balance the needs of both human and wildlife communities is paramount. Maine Audubon strongly supports opportunities to provide better technical support and guidance to municipalities interested in creating a long-term vision for their communities. With access to the proper tools, Maine’s cities and towns will be better able to balance smart growth with the conservation of important natural resources.

LD 602 aims to support municipalities in accessing existing and future federal and state programs for housing, land-use, and economic development by instructing Regional Planning Organizations and Councils of Governments to provide guidance for how to take advantage of these programs. Additionally, it instructs Organizations and Councils to assist municipalities with examining regional suitability for new housing developments and the development of ordinances to govern new housing development generally. Some Organizations and Councils may already be doing this, but this will make it clear that this is another important function they can play. However, they will likely need additional funding to build capacity to address this increasingly challenging issue.

Finally, the bill instructs Organizations and Councils to establish mapping and general Geographic Information Systems (GIS) support for municipalities in order to help advance housing goals – an excellent idea. However we strongly suggest including Beginning with Habitat (BwH)

information as a fourth category to the list under part C for each of the subsections referenced. The BwH program collates, maps, and distributes data on the location of high value wetlands and waterways, animals, plants, plant communities, large undeveloped blocks of habitat, habitat connections, and Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance, all of which are the foundation of an interconnected system of conserved and undeveloped rural lands to complement developed lands across the landscape. These areas not only provide important habitat for our native plants and animals, but provide flood control, clean air and water, recreational opportunities, agricultural and natural foods, and a variety of wood products for the benefit of both Maine residents and visitors. Housed at the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife but led by a partnership of nonprofits and state and federal natural resource agencies, Beginning with Habitat has a vast array of maps, digital data, printed and digital resources and guides, and publicly available personal guidance on how towns can incorporate these data into their comprehensive plans and land use ordinances.

However, many towns are unfamiliar with these resources and/or the technical support available for how to use them. Ensuring the Regional Planning Organizations and Councils of Governments have the support, experience, and skills they need to provide these data and resources to municipalities will help protect the very nature of Maine that is drawing more people to search for housing here.

Identifying opportunities to improve the delivery of technical assistance to municipalities was a key recommendation from *Maine Won't Wait*, the Maine Climate Council's 2020 Climate Action Plan. Addressing our state's pressing housing needs must happen in tandem with assessments of impacts on our natural resources, rural economies, and nature-based tourism industry. To do this, it is imperative that we equip our towns – *big and small* – with the tools needed to not only make these vital decisions, but to embrace sustainable growth, community well-being, and ecological integrity throughout.

Respectfully, we urge you to support this bill with the additions we propose above. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Francesca "Ches" Gundrum | Policy Advocate