



**Testimony of Kris Allen on Behalf of
the Maine Council on Aging to the Joint Select
Committee on Housing**

**In Favor of LD 1976 - An Act to Update the
Growth Management Program Laws**

Submitted November 13, 2023

Greetings, Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and the members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing.

My name is Kris Allen, and I am a MSW student with the University of Maine and an intern at the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA). The MCOA is a broad, multidisciplinary network of over 135 organizations, businesses, municipalities, and older community members working to ensure we can all live healthy, engaged, and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age at home and in community settings. I am testifying in favor of LD 1976.

Humans are living longer than ever before, and data shows this trend is here to stay. According to the Stanford New Map of Life¹, because a 100-year life is a blessing many of us will be able to enjoy, we must intentionally begin creating “longevity ready” communities that support people living into their 90s and 100s as *active and engaged* members of those communities. This means intentionally including people in their 80s, 90s and 100s in designing community features that work for them, and not just thinking all adults are the same.

People who live in age-positive communities with age-positive beliefs live 7.5 years longer with fewer chronic conditions, less anxiety and depression, and better brain health than those who don’t. The longitudinal studies that have led to these discoveries point to purpose as a driving factor for health and longevity, along with the concepts of belonging and inclusion. Healthier older people are able to work, volunteer and lead longer, solving some of our workforce and volunteer challenges and being good stewards of our communities and environment.

To build “longevity ready” communities, we can’t keep doing the same kind of comprehensive planning we’ve always done. Traditional comprehensive planning has never asked the question, how do we ensure people not only feel like they belong in our communities, but that our communities are intentionally designed to include them at any age. How do people stay connected to community and the things that bring them purpose when they can no longer drive? How can we build housing that works for people in their 90s and 100s located in town centers, walkable to healthcare, food, and social activities, or at least connected to transportation that connects to those services and activities? These questions can only be answered through community conversations with older people co-designing the solutions.

¹ <https://longevity.stanford.edu/the-new-map-of-life-initiative/>

For the last three years, we've been digging deep on data with several pilot communities around Maine. We've found that some communities have significantly fewer people older than 80 living in them than is average for their county and the state. These communities have no alternative housing, transportation, or other services that would support older people staying in those communities if they can't drive, need one-floor living, or need help getting trash to the transfer station.

What this project has shown is that we don't know who is missing from our towns until we start looking. We need to look at data, but we need to disaggregate it to really see who is left out. Once we see who cannot live in a community, we have to use different techniques to get to the "why" – we need to ask the very people who are challenged to remain in a community to say how that community could be intentionally redesigned to meet their needs.

One mechanism to accomplish this is to pass LD 1976. This bill allows for alleviating much of the administrative burden municipalities face when developing comprehensive plans, allowing for greater flexibility throughout the process and increased time for visioning. By shifting the priorities of the process and supplying tools for greater public engagement and participation, municipalities will have greater freedom to focus on growth management strategies that better account for the needs of their communities.

Under LD 1976, Maine's towns and cities will be afforded new resources to help develop planning and implementation strategies. Smaller communities will reap the benefits of reduced metrics to meet baseline criteria and to achieve state approval and larger communities will be equipped to hear from more residents throughout the planning process. For older adults across Maine, this is an amazing opportunity to finally be factored into how we design and develop the spaces we age in.

This means planning new housing projects that align with access to transportation and increasing access to community through the intentional creation of walkable spaces. It also means the spaces where growth opportunities exist will receive an intergenerational focus, to ensure that all ages feel welcomed. Perhaps most importantly, LD 1976 infuses these processes with equity, a crucial and historically missing component of community development.

Our current methods of community planning and growth management often leave the needs of people in their 80s, 90s, and 100s out altogether – we plan for those who show up and treat adults like they come in one-size-fits-all. This means at some point many older people become disconnected from community – no longer intentionally included and certainly not feeling as if they belong. Indeed, many who have spent a lifetime in a town find they must leave later in life.

Since we now know building age-positive communities that include the needs of older residents leads to longer, healthier, more productive lives, we should plan accordingly! The improvements to community planning found within LD 1976 will help move us to create socially integrated and sustainable communities that value older residents as a meaningful part of community.

Thank you for your consideration and I'm happy to take any questions.

Kris Allen