

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing;

My name is Ben Frey. I live in Newcastle and am the Chair of the Newcastle Planning Board. I am here to testify in support of LD 1976.

I have been involved in this process of updating the GMA and have submitted many comments. My history, and my home town's history, with GMA goes back several years.

In 2016 Newcastle began the process of updating its outdated Comprehensive Plan and Land Use Ordinances. We hired consultants; had a dedicated volunteer committee; held the largest community planning event in Newcastle's history; had the greatest amount of resident participation in our history, and in June 2018 the voters of Newcastle approved the newly minted Comprehensive Plan by a 2 to 1 margin.

Shortly thereafter we submitted it to the State for review. Five years later our Plan is still not approved despite many rounds of edits and resubmissions. The cost to get to this point, both in financial terms and in the staggeringly large number of volunteer hours, underscore the question many of us have asked: is this even worth it?

In our process we spent approximately 80% of our time discussing issues relating to rural areas and discovered how a simple seeming question is truly complex; what is rural? We discovered that 'rural' can have many different types of identity, and is not just the catch-all label for everything left over when you're done mapping and identifying everything else. We discovered that rural areas are more than lands that haven't been subdivided or developed or conserved yet.

Our work mapping various areas of town began with and relied on stories and discussions about what kind of identity these different places in our community represented. What we might now call PlaceTypes, were then taken and transformed into zoning, which we also adopted, and underpin the goals and action items in our Comprehensive Plan.

I support the proposed changes to the GMA because it removes barriers for small towns like mine, it has language that helps deepen our understanding of rural areas, and it provides a framework for community's conversations about their important places.

I am available to answer questions or as a resource during work sessions.

Thank you for your time.