



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF SOUTHERN MAINE

February 20, 2024

Brian Elowe
CEO, Boys & Girls Clubs of Southern Maine
277 Cumberland Avenue
Portland, ME 04112

Senator Joe Baldacci
Representative Michele Meyer
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
100 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Oral testimony in support of LD 2197 - An Act to Strengthen the Health, Well-being and Academic Success of Children and Their Families Through Increased Community Support of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Southern Maine

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Brian Elowe, and I am the CEO of Boys & Girls Clubs of Southern Maine. Before I begin, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Speaker Talbot Ross for her sponsorship of LD 2197. Her dedication to championing initiatives that uplift our community's most vulnerable members is truly commendable and serves as an inspiration to us all.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Southern Maine operates with a mission “to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens.” We have been part of the fabric of southern Maine communities for over 115 years. Today we operate out of nine sites in Lewiston, Auburn, Portland, South Portland, and Biddeford. We support more than 3,000 members of which 500 children and teens attend one of our Clubs each day. 70% of Club youth live in low-income situations, and 60% identify as people of color. Amidst the affordable housing crisis, many of our members and their families are currently or have recently experienced a level of homelessness and/or displacement.

We offer daily meals, caring and safe spaces, and a critical emotional support system to children facing socio-economic challenges. Our program continuum is specifically designed for youth ages 6-18 and focuses on social/emotional support with trusted mentors, future planning, and confidence building. Across all age groups - elementary, middle, and high school students - we effectively deliver core programs in Academics, Arts, Leadership, and Health & Wellness.



Our historic Portland Clubhouse has been a sanctuary for disadvantaged youth for over 100 years, but the constraints of its outdated structure limit our impact in Southern Maine. Data tells us that every day in Maine, 40,000 children and teens are unsupervised after school, with half of those living in Southern Maine. The need for our services has truly never been greater.

In response, we have launched a strategic plan to bring to life a bold vision that will double the number of children and teens we serve to over 500 youth each day at our envisioned Greater Portland Youth Campus. This \$15M project will transform lives and provide opportunities for youth across the region. Central to this endeavor is the establishment of a 16,000 square foot headquarters for our highly successful Bridge to Success Program—a barrier-free initiative focused specifically on teens. The proposed Bridge to Success Teen Center will provide dedicated spaces for junior high and high school age youth to intensify their studies, develop their passions, and build essential skills. Immersed in the program, students will explore how their interests can translate into future career opportunities or higher education, igniting ambitions ranging from the trades, to engineering, technology, the arts and more. The new Center will be able to serve over 250 teens daily from the cities and towns in the southern Maine/Greater Portland communities and will include space for:

Career Exploration Labs: Where teens will explore how their passions can lead to careers in business, building trades, and more through VR technology and practical hands-on experiences/training in the trades. Three “garage” bays will allow for a multitude of practicums rotating throughout the year. We have plans to pursue partnerships with community colleges, trade associations and others in support of this program.

Café and Teaching Kitchen: Enhancing the ability to provide meals every day while offering teaching opportunities in culinary arts, service, and hospitality industries.

Tech/Gaming Center: Featuring 1st class gaming-based opportunities, drawing teens in while providing access to current technologies and coding-based skills.

Community Partner Hub: Hosting space for local organizations, fostering collaboration and providing services to kids and families in areas such as a health concierge service.

Program Space: Dedicated areas for traditional programs in arts, academics, leadership, and health & wellness.

Our vision is to fulfill our goal of ensuring that our members graduate high school on time with a plan for their future. By offering state-of-the-art technology and modern amenities, we not only empower our teen members with tools for academic advancement, career exploration, and



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF SOUTHERN MAINE

personal growth, but ultimately equip them with the skills and resilience needed to thrive in an increasingly competitive world. Imagine a first-class facility that provides resources, support and on-site training at a level that is comparable to the resources available for youth in communities with greater means.

Doubling the number of youths served is a bold statement of equity. The impact of this project extends far beyond our Club walls as it promises to create a more inclusive and prosperous future for all Maine residents. Recognizing the dramatic changes that Maine has undergone in the past two decades and the new challenges that we face, we ask this committee and legislature's partnership on this crucial project to make a dramatically positive difference in the lives of tens of thousands of low-income children and teens in the years to come. Your investment will bolster programs that address immediate needs such as food insecurity and transportation, support intellectual and emotional growth, and will accelerate the availability of career exploration for hundreds of youths in southern Maine. Our innovative Bridge to Success program is a model that other youth organizations across Maine will be able to replicate, ultimately accelerating the kinds of support services the recent "Task Force to Study the Creation of a Comprehensive Career and Technical Education System" recommended.

By helping our youth become successful, businesses and our communities will become even stronger as a result. Thank you for supporting LD 2197. I would be pleased to address any questions you may have about this vital initiative.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'R.S.' followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

PROPOSED DESIGN
CUMBERLAND AVE



● Boys & Girls Club Portland Youth Campus | SMRT Architects and Engineers

PROPOSED DESIGN
CEDAR STREET



Boys & Girls Club Portland Youth Campus | SMRT Architects and Engineers



**LEVEL 1 FLOOR PLAN
UPDATES TO REFLECT EXTERIOR STUDY**

