

131st Legislature

Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Joint Select Committee on Housing

Testimony of Scott Vlaun, Center for an Ecology-Based Economy, February 23, 2024

in favor of the Supplemental Budget LD2214

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; and Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing. My name is Scott Vlaun. I am the executive director of the Center for an Ecology-Based Economy (CEBE), based in beautiful and historic downtown Norway. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today in support of applying Supplemental Budget funds to address Maine's growing housing emergency.

For the last 11 years our organization has been working to help build a climate resilient, regenerative and just economy in rural western Maine, growing from a volunteer-led grassroots organization to one with seven employees and a nearly a half-million dollar annual budget. Our work spans the interrelated areas of food, energy, transportation, and the reason I'm here today, shelter.

In addition to many other projects, to address the housing crisis and labor shortage, we have supported women-led carpentry workshops, designed tiny houses, built over a thousand window inserts and led a community weatherization project for LMI households.

Most recently, CEBE has supported a group of local residents, many struggling with housing insecurity, to develop the Norway Equitable Housing Cooperative. NEHC is a visionary 18-unit project that will be resident-owned, net-zero, and located within walking distance of essential services and recreational spaces. With ADA compliant units, a shared community building and gardens, and limited equity for resident-owners, it will be a model and catalyst for sustainable housing development that will support local businesses, while improving community health.

CEBE has raised nearly \$150,000 from private donations to purchase the site, remediate asbestos, demolish derelict structures, and contract with architects, surveyors, and engineers. We have also focused countless hours of staff time and dedicated our entire 2023 annual appeal to this project, to not only help solve the immediate need for housing workers, elders, and others struggling to find a safe and healthy home, but also to lower our community's greenhouse gas pollution in keeping with Maine's ambitious climate action plan. The use of highly efficient building technologies, beneficial electrification and onsite solar power, will also significantly reduce operating costs and insulate residents from volatile energy prices.

With inflated construction costs, and high interest rates, this project will not happen without grant funding. We are working with Genesis Fund and others to prepare an application for the Rural Affordable Housing Rental Program, which we know is woefully underfunded in relation to the number of worthy projects that will be applying. I urge the committee to consider investing as much as possible of the unallocated \$100 million in the Supplemental Budget to this program and other initiatives to support communities like mine to address the housing crisis in Maine.

Thank you for your time,

Scott Vlaun, Executive Director, Center for an Ecology-Based Economy