



Testimony in Support of LD 2214, An Act Making Unified Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024, and June 30, 2025

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Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. I am Pete Didisheim, the Advocacy Director at the Natural Resources Council of Maine, and I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of two items in the Governor's supplemental budget request.

Specially, I am testifying in support of the proposed establishment of the Maine Office of Community Affairs (Language Part "DD") and the proposal to provide \$5 million to the Community Resilience Partnership program (Language Part "EE").

Creating a new Maine Office of Community Affairs is an excellent idea that follows directly from the recommendations of a report to this Committee and the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, submitted in December 2023 by the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF), as required by a Resolve (LD 1934) enacted last year.

NRCM testified in support of LD 1934, we provided input for the report, and we're pleased with the proposal that is now before you.

Communities across Maine face a growing set of challenges as they seek to strengthen their local economies, maintain the character of their communities, attract new residents, strengthen their workforce, manage growth pressures, address risks associated with climate change, and balance a broad range of competing interests that will affect their futures.

Currently, the State provides technical assistance and planning grants to Maine communities to address many of these challenges, but this support is disjointed and not as coordinated as it could be, or as it once was.

For nearly 45 years, from 1968 until 2012, Maine had a State Planning Office (SPO), with a broad range of responsibilities, including providing technical support to towns to help them address challenges caused by development and economic issues. As one would assume from its name, the State Planning Office helped Maine communities plan for their future, which was an important and valued service.

As Yogi Berra once said: "If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else."

When SPO was dismantled, its various components were distributed to other agencies. The December report states that, while many of the programs formerly run by SPO are managed well

today in their new agency locations, “the complexity and interlocking nature of challenges facing communities, as well as the planning, expertise, and funding needed to address them, demands an increased level of coordination across these agencies to be most effective and efficient.”

The proposed Office of Community Affairs will help achieve the “increased level of coordination” that’s needed now, including by helping communities take advantage of a broad and complex array of funding opportunities available to support communities in addressing long-term challenges, including through the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act.

Creation of the new Office of Community Affairs will help increase the efficiency of technical service support programs for Maine communities, increase the ability of communities to plan for their future, increase their prospects for securing federal grants, and deepen partnerships between the state and local governments.

We believe the proposed office represents a thoughtful reorganization of existing state programs and resources that would benefit Maine communities. For these reasons, we encourage you to support Language Part DD.

The Community Resilience Partnership program is one of the programs that will be housed in the new Office of Community Affairs. This program has provided valuable grants and technical assistance to more than 170 communities across the state for projects to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; transition to clean energy; and help towns become more resilient to climate impacts such as those caused by extreme weather events.

With the December and January storms fresh in our minds, and the damage caused to working waterfronts, infrastructure, and communities statewide, the proposal for an additional \$5 million to this program is both timely and needed. Helping Maine communities prepare for the climate change impacts of our future is a wise investment that will offset bigger expenses down the road.

The importance of community resilience investments was highlighted at a January 23rd special meeting of the Maine Climate Council. Maine communities from Stonington to Bethel to Kennebunk are still reeling from the damage caused by those storms – and the damage they caused to roads, bridges, public buildings, utilities, and other infrastructure. We urge you to support the proposed \$5 million for the Community Resilience Partnership program that will support programs and investments at the local level that make our communities more resilient to future impacts from a changing climate.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of budget language “DD” and “EE.” I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.