



Glenn "Chip" Curry
Senator, District 11

THE MAINE SENATE
131st Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony of Senator Chip Curry introducing
**LD 2231, "Resolve, to Promote Access to Education and Workforce Development
by Transferring Ownership of the Hutchinson Center Property in Belfast to the
City of Belfast."**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
March 6, 2024*

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennen, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am Chip Curry, and I am honored to represent Senate District 11, which includes the 26 rural, coastal, and island communities of Waldo County. Today, I ask for your consideration and support of LD 2231, "Resolve, to Promote Access to Education and Workforce Development by Transferring Ownership of the Hutchinson Center Property in Belfast to the City of Belfast."

LD 2231 is before you today as an emergency measure because the University of Maine, after closing the Hutchinson Center this past August, has decided to dispose of the facility through an RFP process that does not ensure the center will maintain its educational mission. The University has established a process where they alone will decide the fate of the Hutchinson Center based upon what is in the best interest of the University. I believe that representatives of the University of Maine should not be the ones making the decision and that "the best interest of the University" is the wrong criteria for determining the future of this extremely important public asset.

The vast majority of the funding that built the Hutchinson Center came from those who live in or are strongly connected to midcoast Maine. You will hear from people behind me that the donors had a specific intent to increase access to higher education in the midcoast. This is a public resource built for the people of the midcoast, by the people of the midcoast, and they should be the ones determining its future. The criteria for determining the best future use of the center should not be based on what is in the best interest of the University but rather on what use best serves the mission of increasing access to education in midcoast Maine.

The Hutchinson Center is a roughly 32,500-square-foot facility purpose-built as an institution for higher education. The facility was opened in 2000 and expanded in 2008. This facility was the brain-child of MBNA CEO Charles Cawley, in collaboration with UMaine President Fred Hutchinson. MBNA built and maintained ownership of the facility and even paid all operating expenses for the first few years while UMaine got its programs up and running. Total land purchase and Phase 1 construction costs for the facility were \$12 million, paid for by MBNA. The purpose of this facility was to provide higher education to the company's employees as well as the people of midcoast Maine. When Bank of America purchased MBNA, they transferred ownership of the facility to the University of Maine.

*Chair, Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business Committee
Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee*

*State House: (207) 287-1515 * Fax: (207) 287-1585 * Toll Free: 1-800-423-6900 * TTY: 711*

*Chip.Curry@legislature.maine.gov * legislature.maine.gov/senate*



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In 2008, recognizing a need for lab science spaces and conference facilities, Hutchinson Center champions engaged in a capital campaign to build Phase 2 of the facility. While there is a discrepancy between in numbers recorded by campaign chairs and the University, we know that at least \$1.1 million was raised by local funders to support the expansion. The co-chairs of this campaign, Judy Stein and James Patterson, are both involved in the current local effort to redevelop the facility.

In addition to the capital campaign, the University of Maine took out a \$2 million bond to complete the facility. On February 7, 2024, UMS Board President Trish Riley wrote in an op-ed in the Pen Bay Pilot that UMaine spent \$2.9 million (almost \$1 million more than the amount bonded) for renovations. I've just thrown a lot of numbers at you, but here is the summary:

Description	Percentage	Amount
Total Capital Investment	100%	\$16,000,000
Local Investment	82%	\$13,100,000
University Investment	18%	\$2,900,000

In a rural area of the state like ours, a facility such as the Hutchinson Center represents a significant community asset. Selling it off to meet the needs of the University constitutes an unjust taking of this public resource.

I am passionate about this topic, not simply because of a sense of justice. I am passionate because there is an excellent opportunity to utilize this facility in a manner that best meets the needs of adult and place-based learners to access high-quality education and workforce development right in our community.

Local leaders have been developing a business plan to manage the facility so that it can provide students access to higher education. Redeveloped, the Hutchinson Center would partner with other civic, arts, and educational organizations to raise the necessary revenues to cover the operational expenses of the facility. The City of Belfast is committed to supporting this transition.



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This vision might be a hard sell to those who think the future of higher education is all online. Why should anyone open a satellite campus when everyone is just taking remote courses? I've been working in the field of higher education for over 30 years, and the truth is online education does not provide access to education for all students. When online education is the only option for students to take all of their classes, we are choosing to exclude some people.

Online-only educational options create significant barriers for:

- adults returning to school for career changes,
- veterans whose living benefits require on-site classes,
- first-generation college students,
- participants in our social service and workforce programs such as Parents as Scholars, The Hope Program, and the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program
- Students with disabilities
- Students without broadband
- Students in the crisis of poverty

Distance students continue to need support to learn how to succeed in post-secondary education, advisors to assist with navigating financial aid, advocates to help them through personal crises, faculty to connect them with internships, and trusted advisors to engage in those deep conversations regarding purpose and growth. The Hutchinson Center can serve to deliver services and extend real educational access to the people of the midcoast.

Like you, I am passionate about Maine being a place where people can affordably gain the skills and credentials they need to succeed in this economy. I recognize that UMaine no longer wishes to be the steward of this public asset. I wish them no ill will. Through LD 2231, the people of Belfast are asking the Legislature to return this public asset to them so that they can continue the mission of promoting high-quality access to education for the people of Waldo and Knox counties.

I thank you for your time, and I would be very happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chip Curry".

Chip Curry

State Senator, District 11

Representing the twenty-six rural, coastal, and island communities of Waldo County

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