

**State of Maine Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Hutchinson Center Bill LD2231 Public Hearing**

March 6, 2024

Presented by the Future of the Hutchinson Center Steering Committee

Chair Rafferty, Chair Brennan, members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony in support of this bill to transfer ownership of the Hutchinson Center from the University of Maine to the City of Belfast. Others are speaking of past costs, I will focus on the vision the community and this committee have for the future and how we know we can make it happen.

This message represents the consensus opinion of the Future of the Hutchinson Center Steering Committee, which is composed of local leaders and citizens of mid-coast Maine. Committee members reflect a broad spectrum of the community—you can read about our credentials—[a former officer of MBNA who was intimately involved in the creation of the Center, the first community member of the Center's Advisory Board and co-chair of the fundraising effort that created the second wing of the Center, the first Director of the Hutchinson Center, the Executive Director of a highly successful local not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization, a former Belfast Mayor and City Councilor, a University professor, a professional engineer and former Chair of the Belfast Planning Board, business owners, and experts in building systems.] The committee also represents over 1,200 citizens who have voiced their support for this transfer in a recent public petition, some of which Kim will share with you.

Educational Need

Looking ahead, the success of Maine citizens in a challenging and rapidly changing world will depend on education and job training. For us to succeed in broadly educating our citizenry and building our future workforce, it is vital that we make sure that everyone has an opportunity to learn. Charles Cawley, CEO of MBNA understood the importance of providing accessible education in a facility that was inviting for students who need to hold a regular job while attending college, who have family obligations that do not allow them to move, who do not have a supportive home environment that is conducive to effective online learning, who need to speak in person to counselors, teachers, mentors and fellow students in order to fully understand their educational options, to be successful in the classroom.

The Hutchinson Center

The Hutchinson Center is not just any old building in the mid-coast region. It is not a converted grocery store or industrial complex. The Hutchinson Center was conceived, designed and built to be a state-of-the-art adult educational center that encourages teaching and learning of the highest standards. It was a magnificent gift to the community, Dr. James C. Patterson, the first Director of the Hutchinson Center, understood the importance of active, enthusiastic leadership. Under his leadership, the Hutchinson Center blended academic, cultural and community life and encouraged students of all ages and all backgrounds. It made money that went to the University. We have that model and we can again fill the center with energy and enthusiasm, with large and small classes, with lectures and conferences, with

hands-on training and in-person counseling and mentoring. It is ideally located in Belfast to serve the mid-coast Maine region, a region of potential growth that has no other institution of higher education.

The City plans to work with the Future of the Hutchinson Center Steering Committee to establish a 501(c)3 organization to manage the Center as a community, educational and cultural center and to make a portion of it available to the University of Maine to lease now and in the future, if the University system so wishes, while relieving the University of the responsibility of operating, managing and maintaining the facility.

The Best Solution

This is the best solution to address the University's and the community's needs, today and in the future.

Thank you for your consideration. We support this bill.

Sincerely,

The Future of The Hutchinson Center Steering Committee

Judy Stein, Chair

Todd Bluhm

Doug Chamberlin

Kim Fleming

Shane Flynn

Mike Hurley

John McKeith

James Patterson

Larry Theye

Hugh Townsend

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Hutchinson Center Public Petition

Community support for the transfer of the Hutchinson Center to the local community is reflected in a public petition that was created and issued online in February 2024. The petition reads:

Petition to the University of Maine Regarding the Hutchinson Center

Given the University of Maine's decision to divest itself of the Hutchinson Center, we respectfully request that the Hutchinson Center be transferred to local ownership in order to:

- Retain the Center as the premier educational, cultural and community center of the Mid-Coast Maine region;
- Acknowledge and protect the community's investment in the Center; and
- Preserve the opportunity for higher education at the Hutchinson Center today and for the future."

To date, more than 1,200 positive responses have been received along with many individual comments. Over 100 different towns and cities have been represented from the Mid-Coast region and elsewhere in the responses.

Individual comments were numerous enough to create twenty-four pages of text. The following is a sampling.

Individual Comments

Working at Belfast Area High School the whole time this center has been in existence, I have seen first hand the benefit to our youth. It's already been missed just the past 6 months. Please keep it a locally owned and operated education center. (Morrill)

As a UM alumni, Mainer and resident of Belfast, Belfast and Waldo County should retain the Center as our educational, cultural and community center of the Midcoast Maine region. (Belfast)

I am a graduate of the Hutchinson Center, using the center to attain both my BSW and MSW. Our community needs to continue to have this resource available so nontraditional students like me can attain dreams they never thought possible -signed the Non-Traditional Student of the Year 2016. (Freedom)

I belong to many non-profits, organizations and groups in the greater Belfast Area and we all took a hand in raising the monies to build that new wing, including our Senior College at Belfast. The Waldo County General Hospital, the Y, the Rotary, and many businesses all were fundraising. The Hutchinson Center had a very prominent mission in our area and should continue in that role. Turning it back to Belfast is the best possible outcome that the University of Maine could do. It was given to them gratis free, and should be returned in the same vein. (Searsport)

From 2005 to 2007, I attended the MSW program, all live classes at the Hutchinson Center. Since that time I have had the good fortune to become a licensed clinical social worker and a contemplative spiritual director. My work has been centered around community mental health and alcohol/drug counseling. To have this amazing resource in the community paved the way for me to invest my life work in helping others. It was an amazing and fulfilling experience. Please may we continue offering higher education and training opportunities to our community members. Thank you. (Belfast)

When I moved to Belfast 3 years ago, I was drawn by the active arts community, but when my son-in-law told me about the Hutchinson center, I was sold - impressed that the Univ. of Maine and the Midcoast had such a supportive relationship. This is just the concept that promotes positive dialogue and opens horizons. This makes the community stronger. There is no downside to working out a future to continue this unique and highly valued center of learning. (Belfast)

The Hutchinson Center is an invaluable resource to the community. I have attended classes there through the Senior College, poetry events through the annual Poetry Festival, local educational meetings, the list could go on and on. Belfast needs to keep this resource. It's a place where people of all ages can further their education and prepare for jobs without having to drive miles to Augusta, Orono or Bangor. Many people cannot afford to travel long distances to further their education. In a time of climate crisis, we need to acknowledge that local education is important to the future of Maine. We need to preserve the Hutchinson Center so that it can resume its educational and cultural functions. (Belfast)

Since MBNA gifted the Center to the University for the benefit of the surrounding communities, it only seems fair that they should offer it back to the communities it served before selling it for a profit. We could use a regional educational center here in Waldo County for the use of all residents. (Belfast)

My daughter and I have both taken classes at the Hutchinson Center that have allowed us to complete our education locally and then obtain jobs in our chosen fields. It has enriched the lives of many, and the center is also a social hub in a society where fractured relationships have become the chief driver of mental illness, addiction and crime. The value of preserving social centers in the face of such dislocation and disenfranchisement cannot be overstated. The Hutchinson Center holds a very special place in the hearts of many Maine citizens and saving it makes sense on every level. (Appleton)

This was a gift to the community of Waldo County, Belfast, and environs, to be administered in good faith by University of Maine. The Belfast community contributed intensely to the development and maintenance of the Hutchinson Center for the community. University of Maine should return the Hutchinson Center to Belfast with acknowledgment of all the community has invested to date. (Searsport)

The availability of the Hutchinson Center as an educational hub for the central Maine Coast was a major factor in my decision to move to the Mid-coast 22 years ago. I have been an active member of the Belfast

Senior College ever since and taken on leadership roles with it and in the community, and I contributed to the new wing of the Hutchinson Center precisely because its purpose was to enhance education offerings, especially for nursing students who required lab experience. I have arranged and attended many special events there. I am appalled that the University of Maine, which had nothing to do with the original development of the HC and was invited to oversee its operation as a matter of civic trust, would now consider this a piece of commercial real estate it has a right to sell. That notion betrays its stated purpose and the hundreds of thousands of hours put in by professional educators, administrators and local volunteers to maintain and enhance this premier facility. (Belfast)

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My wife and I were part of the group that helped raise funds for the addition after MBNA provided the initial building. The trustees should remember that the Hutchinson Center exists because of the efforts of MBNA and the Belfast Community. (Belfast)

I agree with this endeavor. I do think the University is foolish to let this property go because there will be a time when higher education in this area will be viable. Perhaps, at that time, and if it is owned by the community, a lease agreement could be reached. Our tax dollars did contribute to its existence. (Northport)

As a contributor to construction of the Hutchinson Center I feel that the University of Maine has no right to sell the property out from under us. I wholeheartedly support community ownership. (Northport)

Over the years since the Hutchinson Center was built, the wider Belfast community put substantial resources and human energy into making the Hutchinson Center what it became. The community understood the FHC as a long-term investment, as a reflection of the University's Land Grant mission to serve communities. This community nurtured a relationship with the University of Maine that was mutually beneficial. Many lives were enriched and changed by having a UMaine presence in Belfast, and having the University leave so abruptly was a jolt that leaves a big void. Remembering that it was originally a gift to UMaine from a major business in Belfast, and recognizing all that the community has put into the Hutchinson Center over the years, it only makes sense to return the facility to the community. It is hard to see so much hard work and so many assets go to waste, sitting empty and unused. Everything in UMaine's mission as a land-grant university supports gifting it in whole or at least in part to the community. (Northport)

University of Maine is behaving shamefully. Return it to Belfast. (Camden)

The Hutchinson Center needs to remain the educational and cultural centerpiece in the Belfast and the Midcoast region. It should NOT be simply sold to the highest bidder for yet another for profit development! The University of Maine needs to value and respect the original intent of the Hutchinson Center, and honor the wishes of the people in the communities that benefit and depend on this facility. (Belfast)

As a graduate instructor at UMAINE I saw firsthand how vital the Hutchinson Center was for the graduate students whom I taught and supervised internships for. With Dr Jim Patterson at the helm, we created essential, student oriented programming, even collaborating with local school districts to integrate professional development with UMAINE courses. It was always a very dynamic, inspirational place and I am eager to join the efforts to save it! (Belfast)

The Hutchinson Center is a very important part of Belfast and the surrounding communities and has served the people in this area in so many ways, providing opportunities to pursue further education to a broad range of people, from high school students taking a first college level course and students beginning their college education to those working or at home who choose to pursue a degree later in their lives, and to older community members and senior citizens seeking continuing education and enrichment. Over many years it has been a superior setting for our local high school Advanced Placement students to take national tests, area business and employers to offer job fairs, Maine artists to exhibit their works, Senior College members to pursue further learning, and Best of the Best to highlight and celebrate local and area businesses. And these are just some of the ways the Hutchinson Center has helped serve the people of the greater Belfast and Midcoast area and brought them together as a community of learners and sharers of culture.

As a long-time resident and educator in this area who has believed in and appreciated the mission of the Hutchinson Center, University of Maine, I have been very disappointed in the University's decision to divest itself of the Center. Yet I also see the opportunity for local ownership to continue the work and opportunities first offered through the University and guide the Center to new growth and development and a vibrant, purposeful future for the people of this area.

Thus, I strongly and respectfully urge the University of Maine to transfer its ownership of the Hutchinson Center to local ownership so that it may continue to be the premiere educational, cultural, and community center of Midcoast Maine that it has become. Through local ownership the Community's investment in this center may be acknowledged and protected, and present and future opportunities for further education may be preserved and offered at the Hutchinson Center. (Morrill)

The Mid-Coast community benefited greatly from the Hutchinson Center as both an educational center and as a venue for other talks and activities of interest and importance to individuals and organizations in the area. These included classes at the Belfast Senior College, the Camden Conference's annual conference, a Mid-Coast Forum on Foreign Relations' event for UMaine School of Policy & International Affairs students, and a talk by UMaine's Professor (& Director of UMaine's Climate Change Institute) Paul Mayewski. We need to retain the Hutchinson Center as a resource for this community. (Montville)

I grew up in Belfast and received my Masters in Social Work at the Hutchinson Center. It is a great community asset that Belfast and its citizens invested in with the agreement that it remain. If the University of Maine system no longer wants to be affiliated with the Hutchinson Center it should be returned to the people as was its original intent. (Belfast)

This is a no brainer. The Hutchinson Center is a Belfast institution and needs to be preserved for the educational and community functions for which it was designed. (Belfast)

The Hutchinson Center will become an enormous Belfast, Waldo County, and Midcoast resource for the coming decades when it is locally owned, managed, and programmed. In its new organizational form, it will become self-sustaining in short order. It will be a major instrument in finally establishing Belfast as a statewide cultural and creative center. The University of Maine will ultimately gain great benefit from its

enthusiastic support of this important transition through the good will generated in making this evolution happen smoothly and positively. (Liberty)

I was born and raised in Belfast, Maine. I love this community so much, and I continue to work in Waldo County at Mount View High School. This building serves as an important piece of our community. Myself, I have taken AP tests there, attended student assemblies/presentations, and we currently use it to host our local Model UN. (Belfast)

Yikes! What is the university thinking? (Belfast)

Closing the Hutchinson Center will be a HUGE loss to the Midcoast. It plays a vital role in our area with the myriad offerings and uses by and for the community. (Searsport)

The Hutchinson Center provided an opportunity for many people to obtain an education and a degree that would not have been possible for them otherwise. It has served as a vital community and cultural center for the mid-coast region for all ages. (Portland OR)

The Hutchinson Center, was meant to be a gift to the people of Waldo County, Belfast and the Midcoast and not as a trophy traded to the highest bidder. (Belfast)

Hutchinson Center was a gift to the community, including many local donations to make it possible to bring higher learning to the midcoast. The Center should remain with the community and not be sold off by University of Maine to the highest bidder. I was angered by the University's decision to withdraw from the Center - there was no dialogue with the City or the local community. Frankly this action goes against the values the University has embedded and spoken about. (Northport)

I have attended Camden Conference events and other cultural and educational events at the Hutchinson Center for many years. I strongly support this community-based plea that the University of Maine honor its commitment to an informed and participatory citizenry in Belfast and the entirety of Midcoast Maine by conveying ownership of the Hutchinson Center to the community. (Rockland)

I hope the U of Maine will act in good faith and return the Hutchinson Center to Belfast and the people of the Mid-Coast, as intended by MBNA who originally gifted it to the community. (Northport)

I am an employee of the Belfast School System, RSU71, as well as a neighbor in the next town, and firmly believe that the Hutchinson Center has, and can continue, as a vital center for lifelong learning for residents of all ages, in addition to being available for higher education for the traditional college age population, and for workers wishing to continue adding to their job related learning. Historically, the Hutchinson Center has, and needs to continue serving, as a center for cultural events that fit perfectly with the concept of lifelong learning. Our public schools have met this need all through history, as have our State's colleges and Universities. The Hutchinson Center fell right into that tradition, and helped Belfast, along with much of the Midcoast Region, to provide inclusivity, learning and social possibilities that might never have occurred without the center. It has become the heart within the heart of the Belfast community, along with all of Waldo County and our neighboring counties and must be retained by those same people who have come to rely on its existence. (Searsport)

Belfast and the surrounding area are growing and we really need to keep an educational facility active to support the future of the community. The university, I expect, would still be interested in providing some classes there if they no longer have to carry the responsibility for the entire property. (Belfast)

My wife and I were contributors of \$10,000 to name an office. Very interested in seeing it have a "new life" to serve the community in the way it has been serving it. (Camden)

This is an invaluable resource for a much, much larger area than Belfast. (Orono)