

Chairs Brennan and Rafferty and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

I am Betty Becker-Theye, professor emerita of Modern Languages and former Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Humanities at the University of Nebraska-Kearney. I retired to Belfast and taught classes in Spanish and French at the Hutchinson Center for 9 years. I am reading the Testimony of Todd Bluhm, member of the Steering Committee who cannot be here today.

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

March 6, 2024

Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, supporting LD 2231

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

I am writing to urge you to support LD2231 and transfer ownership of the Hutchinson Center to the City of Belfast. The University's decision to sell the facility is short-sighted, and runs counter to the interests of the State of Maine.

The abandonment of the Hutchinson Center means we all will lose decades of the economic benefit that comes from a better-educated population. The University claims that remote classes will fill the gap, but we all know online classes are a poor substitute to in-person learning, and are not applicable to hands-on training. In many cases, remote learning itself discourages enrollment as students ultimately find it unsatisfying. The economic activity generated by Hutchinson Center—in the form of a thousands of Mainers ready to take on better paying jobs and innovate on their own—will more than offset the funds gathered to cover a short term problem. Even a quick survey of the comments section in the petition illustrates this point: time and again residents cite how the Hutchinson Center was their pathway to a new career.

Climate change is presenting us with great challenge, but also opportunity in the form of new residents and new economic areas of activity. Both will require new training to help us adapt and hopefully continue to thrive. Why, then, would we close an educational facility now? Why would we say to residents who cannot make a two-hour round trip in a day to take a class: this new future is not for you. Moreover, if we give up the Hutchinson Center, imagine how extraordinarily difficult it will be to re-create another such facility in the future. If the needs for the Hutchinson Center are not obvious now, they soon will be as we become aware of the global changes around us. Founding a new center will be so much more expensive, and so much more difficult than the simple decision to transfer ownership and preserve something we already have.

If the benefit of this appeal isn't already apparent, consider that you have before you a qualified group ready to run the facility as a non-profit. You have a dedicated municipality ready to back it, and a deep community of potential students across the entire Mid-Coast.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Todd Bluhm  
Belfast