



**Testimony by William Norbert
Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager**
in Partial Support of and Partial Opposition to L.D. 2241
An Act to Eliminate Inactive Boards and Commissions

March 12, 2024

Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government:

My name is Bill Norbert. I am the Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager at the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME). I am here to testify in partial support of and in partial opposition to L.D. 2241, *An Act to Eliminate Inactive Boards and Commissions*.

I do not often have the privilege of attending this committee's hearings, so I would first like to remind you that FAME is a quasi-independent state agency that provides financial solutions that help Maine people achieve their business and higher education goals. We create business and educational opportunities through our willingness to invest at greater risk based on public benefit. FAME has been tasked by the Legislature since 1990 with administering the state's higher education finance programs. These include various grant, loan, and loan repayment programs.

The bill as drafted would eliminate two FAME-related advisory committees: the Advisory Committee on Medical Education and the Maine Health Care Provider Loan Repayment Program Advisory Committee. We respectfully support elimination of the first but oppose elimination of the second. We also wish to speak in favor of retaining the Maine Workforce, Research, Development and Student Achievement Institute.

Administered by FAME since 1991, the **Advisory Committee on Medical Education** (ACME) committee has greatly reduced the frequency of its meetings and work and been inactive for several years now. After considerable reflection by FAME staff, we believe the time has come to eliminate it from statute.

ACME originally was created to assist FAME in evaluating and improving the medical education programs set forth in Chapter 424 of Title 20-A M.R.S.A. These included the Access to Medical Education Program (now defunct); the Doctors for

Maine's Future Scholarship Program; and the Health Professions Loan Program. Over the years, ACME served an important role in helping FAME as we set-up these programs and evaluated their progress and success. They also gave important input as these programs changed to meet evolving workforce needs. These programs have either been eliminated or changed over time. We believe that ACME's utility has run its course and that it has reached the end of its useful life.

The Access to Medical Education Program, first established in 1991 to allow the state to purchase seats for its residents at certain out-of-state medical schools, became defunct when it was replaced by the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program in 2009. That program, offering \$25,000 per year scholarships to certain selected medical students, was created to support sending Maine residents or individuals with strong Maine ties to study at one of Maine's two in-state medical schools: University of New England College of Medicine (UNECOM) and the Tufts-Maine Medical Center Maine Track Program. The Doctors for Maine's Future Program is operating well and benefits from frequent consultation and input from our two medical schools. In fact, these schools help to select participants annually and to report to the Legislature on the program's progress.

The Health Professions Loan Program is a need-based, competitive loan for Maine students pursuing postgraduate medical, dental, and veterinary education. Loans up to \$25,000 annually, up to \$100,000 total for a maximum of four years, are provided. No interest accrues while the recipient is in an eligible residency program. During repayment, the interest rate can be as low as 0% and is based on location and type of practice and/or population served. This program has changed over time, as well. It used to feature a loan repayment portion, but that was amended to recognize the existence of newer and other medical loan repayment programs and to recognize reduced funding for the program. Loans revolve and conserve funding more than loan repayments.

FAME has increasingly relied on informal but active input from experts in the medical education field as we administer other, newer programs, and this has worked well. We appreciate the nimble and flexible nature of this *ad hoc* arrangement. Examples of recently created programs that employ this more informal model include the Maine Health Care Professionals Loan Repayment Pilot Program, the Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program, and the Maine Veterinary Medicine Loan Program. Moreover, not long ago the Legislature supported our recommendation to abolish the former advisory committee assisting the Maine Dental Education Loan and Loan Repayment Programs in favor of more *ad hoc* input.

Over time ACME came to exhibit slower, less active, and less helpful tendencies, despite the good work of its past members. In addition to time constraints placed on participating members, as well as the frequent delays of identifying and securing appointments to various slots, obtaining quorums necessary for meetings, for FAME organizing and hosting meetings proved more difficult over the years and input was less necessary as our programs operated. The Advisory Committee's role has become less important, less active, and less necessary. We therefore support elimination of ACME

and respectfully request that you include it in your list of proposed entities to be eliminated.

Conversely, we oppose the proposed elimination of the **Maine Health Care Provider Loan Repayment Program Advisory Committee** pursuant to 5 M.R.S.A. § 12006(2) because it is too soon and has not been given an opportunity to operate. The underlying program, created in 2021 and set forth at 20-A M.R.S.A. §§ 12951 – 12958, was never funded by the Legislature and, thus, has never been administered or operated by FAME. Consequently, there has been no need to appoint or operate an advisory committee for this program. Unless and until the Legislature chooses to fund the program, we believe it inadvisable and unnecessary to eliminate the advisory committee from statute. Keeping the language in statute will allow for expert committee input on the initial set-up of the program and prioritization of professions to be awarded loans and loan repayment should the program ever become funded and operational.

Please note: this program should not be confused with a similarly named one that is active but operates without an advisory committee: the Maine Health Care Provider Loan Repayment Pilot Program. That program was created by the Legislature in 2022 and funded initially with federal pandemic relief funds as part of the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan (MJRP). The program is geared toward certain health care professionals to address critical workforce shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, including, but not limited to, the behavioral health and oral care sectors. FAME will pay up to \$25,000 per year and, in aggregate, the lesser of \$75,000 and 50% of the recipient's outstanding loan balance in return for service.

Finally, we support retaining the **Maine Workforce, Research, Development and Student Achievement Institute**. FAME's CEO by statute is a member of the steering committee and, although relatively new (established in 2021), we believe the organization should be given more time to meet and realize its mission of collaborating with the Legislature and University of Maine System to collect and analyze information related to workforce training and cost drivers for training, research and development, student debt and economic advancement in the state. Recently, the Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business (IDEA), voted via L.D. 284, *An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Maine Workforce, Research, Development and Student Achievement Institute*, voted to make the Institute, and thus its steering committee, permanent.

Thank you for your attention to our comments. I hope this information is helpful and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.