

Comments in Support of LD 629

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Presented by

Ross Cunningham, Economic and Community Development Director, Town of Lisbon Maine.

Good morning. My name is Ross Cunningham and I am the Economic and Community Development Director for the Town of Lisbon Maine. I am here today to ask for your support of LD 629.

When I first got involved in my community, 15 years ago as a volunteer, our town was just beginning to realize that it was headed the wrong direction. Shuttered storefronts and declining population were two of the major warning signs. This is when we were first introduced to the Maine Downtown Center, a program of the Maine Development Foundation. The ECD at the time, enrolled us as a member. This membership brought us support and access to resources that we never could have identified by ourselves. I recall visits from Bill King and Jayne Palmer of Bath and hearing, with envy, the success they were having through their efforts. They, and the entire network, invested time and energy in Lisbon and helped us get started on this road.

Shortly after attending an annual meeting of the Maine Downtown Center, I joined with other residents and business leaders and formed a local nonprofit community organization. This group, now called Discover Lisbon, has worked tirelessly for over 10 years and, with the unwavering support of the Maine Downtown Center, has been one of the key reasons that Lisbon is a community that has reversed course and is thriving with a "zero vacancy" rate on Maine Street and a rapidly growing population.

Since taking my position on town staff 3 years ago, my interactions with, and support from the Maine Downtown Center, have become a key part of our town's growth strategy. Our relationships with other communities who are sharing similar challenges and the connections to leaders statewide that have resources and advice has been absolutely critical in executing that strategy. Without hesitation, I can confidently say that Lisbon would not be the thriving community it is today without the last 15 years of support from the Maine Downtown Center.

That being said, there is so much more we can accomplish working together. In the 2 last years, we have started to give back by offering support and guidance to communities that are just beginning to face the challenges we faced in 2010. We are now a part of that network that the Maine Downtown Center pulls together to help new members and we are thrilled to step in when asked.

On a more personal note, I had the opportunity in the fall of 2015 to attend The Leadership Maine course offered by the Maine Development Foundation. This course, and the connections made with over 40 leaders from around the state, was absolutely instrumental in my professional and personal growth. Now in its 31st year, this course involves bringing leaders to various parts of our state and creates an understanding of the challenges others face. This process, along with the individual growth and leadership development, brings leaders from diverse social and political backgrounds together and using honest discussion and debate, removes barriers, increases understanding and creates lasting connection, something I feel is needed now more than ever. In addition, I know that

MDF also offers the ICL course and the Policy Leaders Academy, which many of you are familiar with. This slate of educational offerings are creating leaders right here at home.

In closing, I urge you to support LD 629 and return the annual funding to the Maine Development Foundation. The work they do is invaluable to the communities, businesses and residents of our Great State.