

Testimony Against LD 226

**An Act to Protect the Cultural Resources and Historical Heritage of
Sears Island in Searsport by Extending the Conservation
Easement Protections.**

James S. Gillway

I thank the committee chairs Senator Tepler, Representative Doudera and honorable members of the Environmental and Natural Resources Committee for the opportunity to present testimony on LD 226. I am the Town Manager for the Town of Searsport and former Representative for District 98 representing Winterport, Frankfort, Swanville and Searsport. I was also a member of the Sears Island Alternative Uses Committee from 2004 to 2005, The Sears Island Planning Initiative from 2005 to 2007 and the Joint Use Planning Committee for Sears Island from 2007 to 2009. More important than all of that I am a long-time resident of Searsport who took a vacation day from my job to be here to better inform you on the history of Sears Island and the over five-year planning process that resulted in the current division of Sears Island.

I want to start by saying hundreds of residents, dozens of State employees and hired contractors worked diligently and dedicated hundreds of hours of their time to planning for Sears Island. This bill simply disregards all that effort and hard work and that is the most important reason I oppose it. I have provided you with significant documents that were produced from the planning process. The first process was the Searsport Island Alternative Uses Committee (SIAUC). This process was done at the local level. The second process was the Sears Island Planning Initiative (SIPI). This was more of a regional planning process. The third process was the Joint Use Planning Committee. This was designed to more statewide. This was hard work and in the final process was agreed to by an overwhelming majority of the participants. Notably, John Melrose, Captain David Gelinis and Maria Fuentes did not agree expressing concerns that the push for more conservation and less land for future marine transportation will be the reality of the future.

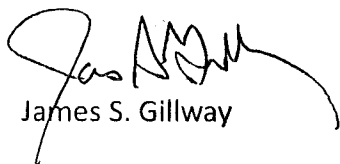
It is very important to understand what price has been paid for the State's efforts in relation to Sears Island. Among the many titles I hold I am the tax collector. Before the island was purchased it was owned by Bangor investment Corporation, and we received taxes from them. When the island was purchased, it came off the tax rolls. The town had to make budget cuts to accommodate the loss of that revenue but generally it was acceptable because in a few years something would be built to make up and exceed that loss. The cargo port was under construction and the newly elected Chief Executive pulled the plug in favor of investing \$20 million dollars on Mack Point. This decision was made to protect eel grass beds located in the vicinity. Side note to that, the eel grass is not there today due to the invasive green crab. That \$20 million dollar investment took 43 acres of land and an existing commercial pier off our tax rolls. I want to note that when one property comes off the tax assessment everyone else pays more to make up the difference. The Town of Searsport has around 2750 people, and we have over 1,762 acres of land

owned by the State, quasi-municipal entities or conservation groups, not including churches and municipal properties. The taxable value of that land mentioned is more than 37 million dollars. We cannot afford to continue supporting all of this with no sight of pay back.

Our town needs jobs, young families to fill the school, and new taxes. I sincerely hope for the health of the community that some initiative can be found to fill those needs. I urge the committee not to turn its back on all of the hard work that went into a truly comprehensive planning process. That process was not a short-term plan, in fact, DOT Commissioner David Cole's ending remarks were that we are conserving 600 acres of the island and preserving the right to develop a marine transportation industry for the future. We don't even know what that might look like twenty years from now, but we will have the land to address its needs.

Mark Twain said, "buy land, they're not making anymore of it." This State needs to remember that and keep the valuable marine transportation resources they have.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James S. Gillway", with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

James S. Gillway