
Joint Standing Committee on Housing & Economic Development

Testimony of Avesta Housing

March 25, 2025

In favor of LD970 - An Act to Prioritize Affordable Housing by Expediting Reviews for Affordable Housing Projects Applying for Funding from the Maine State Housing Authority Sponsored by Rep. Malon

Hello, Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development. We are here today to testify in favor of LD970.

My name is Nate Howes. I am a Development Officer with Avesta Housing. For those unfamiliar with our work, we are the largest non-profit developer of affordable housing in Northern New England with over 100 properties and 3,000 units of affordable housing across Maine and New Hampshire.

We support LD970 to streamline Maine's permitting of state funded affordable housing that is currently adding unnecessary red tape, time and cost to building affordable housing in Maine. LD970 provides simple, consistent, transparent accountability for all stakeholders involved in meeting Maine's housing goals. Maine's investments in building multifamily affordable housing should be put to use in the most efficient route possible, currently time, money and resources are being wasted.

In particular, I want to highlight the current ambiguity surrounding amendments to the Site Location of Development Act (SLODA). For infill developments, those real estate transactions that utilize existing affordable housing campuses, there is no statutory or regulatory review time requirements. Currently new developments are prioritized and those are subject to the 15-business day intake plus 120-day review period. Amendments to existing approved site law projects have no set timeframe. We first encountered this issue at a project in Farmington where we wanted to add 25 units to an existing affordable HUD 202 campus, we were not given a timeline until we engaged with department leadership. It's understandable that DEP wishes to prioritize new applications, but these infill opportunities also represent new affordable housing opportunities. Amendments to existing site law are in a gray area that would be rectified by LD970. Both processes should be faster and LD970 is a great legislative vehicle for achieving this goal.

On the municipal side, we often face a protracted process in local planning boards where projects are delayed in the name of a deliberative process, for its own sake. Planning boards are quasi-judicial bodies, their role is to interpret the ordinance and evaluate projects in meeting that ordinance. In one town, we were given favorable directions from staff and pursued a site plan complaint with that directive. Only when we went to our first workshop were we informed that the board would be ignoring the staff recommendation. Ultimately, our process took over a year and required a zone change. The additional costs to the project were around 50,000 to 75,000 and many sleepless nights for me. Planning boards and staff are professional bodies that need to rely on their ordinances and not be bogged down by the whims of individuals. The time limits proposed in this legislation will hopefully reinforce the need for these meetings to be procedural in nature and not deviate beyond appropriate scope.

Thank you for your consideration in support of LD970. We see this as a pathway to more streamlined, efficient use of state resources in the development of affordable housing in Maine so all Maine people have a home.