



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1440
TTY: (207) 287-4469

Rachel Henderson

87 Holyoke Avenue
Rumford, ME 04276
Office: (207) 287-1440
Cell: (207) 381-4237
Rachel.Henderson@legislature.maine.gov

LD1085 Resolve, Directing the Judicial Branch to Perform an Inspection and Study of the Rumford Courthouse Building

*Testimony of Rep. Henderson - Rumford
April 4th, 2025*

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. I am Rachel Henderson, and I have the distinct honor of representing the people of District-78 in the Maine House. My district is comprised of the beautiful towns of Bethel, Byron, Hanover, Milton TWP, Roxbury, and my home town of Rumford.

I stand before you today to introduce my bill LD1085 Resolve, Directing the Judicial Branch to Perform an Inspection and Study of the Rumford Courthouse Building.

I was approached mid-fall of last year by Rumford's Town Manager, George O'keefe, and asked to put this in.

It is my understanding that some of the reasons behind ending Jury Trials were due to the structural insufficiencies of the building itself. Including but not limited to the inability for jurists to access the court room without having to be in close physical proximity with a defendant of who's case they are presiding over, handicap accessibility, and limited conference rooms.

Guidelines -

The Judicial Branch sets the structural and space guidelines for Court Houses holding Jury Trials, and it's important they have jurisdiction of those guidelines for several reasons:

***Functionality:** Clear guidelines ensure that courtrooms and related spaces are designed to accommodate the various functions of the judicial process, such as hearings, jury trials, and administrative proceedings.*

Accessibility: *Guidelines help ensure that court buildings are accessible to all individuals, including those with disabilities. This helps promote equal access to justice for everyone.*

Safety and Security: *Proper structural standards enhance the safety and security of court facilities for judges, staff, and the public, minimizing risks associated with court proceedings.*

Efficiency: *Well-planned spaces facilitate the efficient movement of people and information, reducing delays and improving the overall effectiveness of the judicial process.*

Public Confidence: *Courthouses that are designed with care and attention to detail can enhance public trust in the judicial system, as they reflect a commitment to fairness and professionalism.*

Adaptability: *Guidelines can provide a framework for future renovations or expansions, allowing courts to adapt to changing needs without compromising functionality.*

Cost-Effectiveness: *Establishing standards can lead to more cost-effective design and construction processes, ensuring that resources are used wisely.*

Preservation of Integrity: *Consistent design guidelines can help maintain the architectural integrity and historical significance of courthouses, which often serve as important civic landmarks.*

Structural and space guidelines are essential for creating functional, accessible, and secure court facilities that uphold the integrity of the judicial process and serve the community effectively. Which is why we are asking the Judicial Branch to do the evaluation.

Over the last number of years previous Town Managers, Economic Development Director, Town Select Board, and dedicated community volunteers have taken a concerted effort to revitalize Rumford, and it's working.

I'm sure you recognize some of the complexities that rural communities face when trying to revitalize a community.

Economic Decline: *Many rural towns experience population loss and economic decline, leading to reduced local spending and business closures. Rumford is currently on the rise, but is still feeling the real effects of it's past Economic Decline.*

Limited Infrastructure: *Aging infrastructure, including roads, utilities, and public buildings, may require significant investment to modernize and support revitalization efforts.*

Access to Funding: *Securing funding for revitalization projects can be challenging, as rural areas may have fewer financial resources and limited access to grants and loans.*

Population Aging: *An aging population can lead to a shrinking workforce, making it difficult to attract new businesses and residents.*

Lack of Services: *Limited access to healthcare, education, and other essential services can deter new residents and businesses from moving to the area.*

Resistance to Change: *Long-standing community members may resist new initiatives or changes, leading to conflicts over revitalization strategies.*

Marketing and Visibility: *Rural towns often struggle with visibility and branding, making it difficult to attract visitors, new residents, and businesses.*

Limited Economic Diversification: *Reliance on a single industry (e.g., agriculture or manufacturing) can make towns vulnerable to economic downturns, necessitating diversification efforts.*

Community Engagement: *Effective revitalization requires strong community engagement and buy-in, which can be difficult to achieve if residents feel disconnected from the process.*

Environmental Concerns: *Balancing development with environmental sustainability can pose challenges, particularly in areas with natural resources that need protection.*

Transportation and Connectivity: *Limited public transportation options and distance from urban centers can hinder economic growth and accessibility for residents.*

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including community collaboration, which Rumford has done well, strategic planning, which our Town has done well, and targeted investment to foster sustainable revitalization.

One of efforts, we believe would be a piece of rebuilding our community, is bringing Jury Trials back to Rumford.

The economic value of a town with a courthouse that holds jury trials can be significant for several reasons:

Increased Local Employment: *Courthouses create jobs for judges, clerks, marshals, and other staff. Additionally, they support local law firms and legal professionals.*

Attraction of Legal Services: *A courthouse can attract law firms, legal consultants, and other service providers, contributing to the local economy. Although the current size of Rumford may not immediately attract NEW law firms, it could attract attorneys to our base law firms.*

Business for Local Vendors: *Jurors and court attendees often spend money on food, lodging, and other services, benefiting local businesses such as restaurants, hotels, and shops.*

Community Engagement: *Jury trials engage citizens in the judicial process, fostering a sense of community involvement and civic responsibility.*

District 78 Bethel, Byron, Hanover, Rumford, Roxbury and Milton Township

Potential for Tourism: Historical courthouses or those associated with notable cases can attract visitors, contributing to local tourism. Have you seen the mural of Moses?

Economic Stability: A local judiciary helps maintain law and order, which is essential for a stable economic environment and can encourage investment.

A courthouse that holds jury trials plays a crucial role in bolstering the local economy by creating jobs, supporting local businesses, and enhancing community value.

To clarify, this bill represents just the first step. It does not ask the Judicial Branch to reinstate jury trials or to invest in upgrades or renovations. Instead, it requests that the Judicial Branch authorize a space study and report on what changes would be necessary to consider returning jury trials to Rumford. Once we receive that report, the Town of Rumford, as the owner of the courthouse, will determine the costs, solicit bids, present the project to the townspeople, and, upon approval, secure funding.

Currently, municipal offices and our Police Department are housed within the building. I recognize that this issue is complex and that the path forward is not entirely clear. However, these complexities do not deter me from exploring our options. Rumford simply wants to understand what upgrades are needed to assess the viability of returning jury trials. I believe this is a reasonable request.

I would ask each of you, as I know you always to, to keep an open mind.

<https://www.uscourts.gov/data-news/judiciary-news/2019/05/09/courts-seek-increase-jury-diversity>

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/judicial/publications/appellate_issues/2023/winter/public-confidence-and-the-courts/