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Testimony of Representative Morgan Rielly presenting

LD 1433, Resolve, to Establish a Working Waterfront Infrastructure Engineer Corps Pilot Program and to Conduct a Feasibility Study of a Higher Education Service Corps Program

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Morgan Rielly, and I represent House District 127, which includes part of Westbrook. I am here today to present **LD 1433, Resolve, to Establish a Working Waterfront Infrastructure Engineer Corps Pilot Program and to Conduct a Feasibility Study of a Higher Education Service Corps Program.**

A. Conduct a Feasibility Study of a Higher Education Service Corps Program:

Volunteer Maine, our state service commission, can work with the University of Maine system, the Maine Community College system, and Maine Maritime Academy to study how we can establish corps at each school to help with workforce development along with providing the opportunity for students to serve in surrounding communities and aid in local economic development.

During the 130th Legislature, we passed the Maine Climate Corps. The initial funding led to Volunteer Maine partnering with Downeast Community Partners in Ellsworth to establish a corps to conduct energy audits of clients' homes. Corps members provided energy efficiency education to community residents, analyzed data from homes audited, and helped community members with weatherization. Corps members received extensive training in weatherization to earn credentials in Building Science Principles and as Building Analyst Technicians and Building Analyst Professionals.

The program was very successful in developing its members and providing training. All the members received the Building Analyst Professional credential and were successful in passing their tests on the first try. This is a testament to the supportive environment for learning cultivated by the program. They also received credentials in Wings (weatherization tech training), OSHA 10, and LEED Green Associate.

Having Volunteer Maine and our colleges look at how we could have corps like the one that worked with Downeast Community Partners at each school, along with expanding existing service infrastructure at Maine's colleges, will have a significant impact on addressing our state's workforce and economic development needs.

Imagine, pairing the education student's acquire at Maine schools with opportunities to serve surrounding communities and receive on-the-job training and credentials. This will put our students at a competitive advantage once they graduate with both a degree and relevant work experience along with connections to future employers in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

It can also introduce students to new career paths that they might not have otherwise considered. For example, Volunteer Maine has proposed an "Invasive Species Corps." Corps members would assist in implementing invasive species control measures, such as harvesting green crabs and members survey waters for the presence of invasive plants. They would engage volunteers in their survey efforts and educate the community about invasive species prevention. While conducting this work, they would also receive training on boat handling and complete a boater safety and education course. This would introduce Maine's students to potential careers working in commercial fishing or aquaculture.

The focus areas in Volunteer Maine's statute for corps are the following: coastal issues, transportation, energy, housing, land and freshwater preservation, community resilience, education, and public health. This provides a wide purview for possible opportunities that fit the interest of the students, the needs of our communities and business, and the programming offered by our schools when designing corps programming.

B. Establish a Working Waterfront Infrastructure Engineer Corps Pilot Program

In May 2024, Governor Mills established the Commission on Infrastructure Rebuilding and Resilience by Executive Order and charged its 24 members with recommending strategies that can reduce the risk of damage from extreme storms and floods, and actions to improve Maine's ability to respond and recover when the next disasters hit. With the $60 million in funding dedicated to these efforts so far, repairs and recovery investments have happened in at least 43 towns and cities, in 70 working waterfront facilities and in over 100 businesses and nonprofits. There is still much more work to be done, and establishing relevant service corps will be integral to this work.

The rate of sea level rise continues to accelerate in Maine. Since 2000, the rate of sea level rise is roughly 2.5 times faster than the long-term trend since 1912. Between January and December 2023, the record for highest monthly mean water level was broken at all long-term gauges in Maine for six months, with mean water levels between 6 and 10 inches higher than the long-term averages for those months.

In 2024, new record water levels were set for five of the first nine months in 2024. A "Cost of Doing Nothing" analysis conducted in 2020 by the Maine Climate Council (MCC) found that forecasted sea level rise by 2050 threatens more than 21,000 coastal jobs in tourism, fishing, and real estate, which is equivalent to three percent of Maine's workforce.

Further, the Coastal and Marine working group recommended in their update to the MCC that we need to increase the resilience of public and private working waterfront infrastructure due to climate change. However, this goal is hindered by labor shortages in marine construction, physical coastal resilience work, and the engineering, planning, and permitting components of these projects.

Establishing a Working Waterfront Infrastructure Engineers Corps will present an opportunity for the state to develop more pathways into these roles and to increase the number of people with appropriate skills and experiences. The extreme winter storms in January 2024 laid bare the workforce and capacity challenges to rebuild working waterfronts, which have been further studied by the Governor's Infrastructure and Resilience Commission and discussed by Maine Sea Grant during their storm response and preparedness in working waterfront community town halls that they conducted last fall and earlier this winter.

This pilot program can recruit and train students from the Maine College of Engineering and Computing at the University of Maine. Maine Seat Grant, which is part of the University of Maine, will oversee the program and consult with Volunteer Maine and the Maine College Engineering and Computing at the University of Maine. The pilot program participants can be either graduate or undergraduate students and after further discussions with the University of Maine and Maine Sea Grant we settled on having a two-year pilot program with five members serving each year.

Students will conduct vulnerability assessments and other analyses of the working waterfront and other essential infrastructure threatened by extreme weather. This model is well-suited for a semester service-learning or summer term project and can tie into the existing capstone project requirements for the University of Maine's engineering students.

The pilot program can help build stronger partnerships with municipalities to provide career awareness and networking, furthering workforce development. Many of our state's municipalities, as previously mentioned in this testimony, don't have the capacity to address these issues and having a corps member will greatly help them.

Corps members will conduct vulnerability assessments and other analyses of working waterfront infrastructure threatened by extreme weather. Students will learn how to engage with municipal and other partners in their projects while receiving on-site education about permitting requirements and funding opportunities to better understand how to move a project from a proposal to implementation. This real world experience and networking with practitioners in the field will expose students to careers in municipalities such as administrators or planners along with hands-on experience serving their communities as engineers. This will better prepare Maine's undergraduate and graduate students for work on public projects, especially those relating to our working waterfronts.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions or to provide you with any information for your upcoming work session.