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Testimony of Representative Ellie Sato presenting
LD 1336, An Act to Establish the Maine-Aomori Sister-state Advisory Council

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development

Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development. My name is Ellie Sato, and I represent House District 109, which includes part of Gorham. I'm proud to present **LD 1336, An Act to Establish the Maine-Aomori Sister-state Advisory Council**.

This bill puts the existing Maine Aomori Sister State Advisory Council (MASSAC) in statute. MASSAC was first established by Governor King in 2001 by executive order to support the ongoing sister city relationship between Bath and Tsugaru, located in the prefecture of Aomori, in Japan. This council, with the support of the nonprofit Friends of Aomori, have maintained a strong relationship between the two cities for many years, mainly through educational and cultural exchanges. Every two years, Bath and Tsugaru would alternate sending delegations to their respective sister city to continue to nurture the partnership, which paused during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relying on consecutive executive orders as administrations change puts the longevity of this relationship at serious risk. Moving the guiding documents from executive order to statute would ensure better sustainability and adaptability for the Council, allowing for greater opportunities for economic development and cultural exchange through this existing partnership.

I'm not from Bath, however, I've seen firsthand the benefits that come from Japan-Maine exchanges. For those who don't know, my father is one of the co-founders of Yosaku Restaurant in Portland. Not that I'm biased, but I do think that Yosaku Restaurant is one of the best—if not the best—sushi restaurants in Maine.

My father's contributions to our local economy go far beyond this restaurant alone. He first moved to the United States in 1972 to help open a restaurant in San Jose. He later moved to Omaha, Nebraska to open a secondary restaurant of the same name. In the late 1980's, he moved to Maine where he helped his cousin, Yoshi Hayashi, open Sapporo Restaurant in Portland. The general manager of the restaurant in Nebraska followed him to Maine, eventually opening his own seafood business, called ISF Trading. ISF Trading has become a destination for many in the Asian-American community throughout New England, as well as an important vendor for many restaurants in Maine.

Now in my father's retirement, he has started a new business that truly showcases the opportunities that can come from Japan-Maine exchanges. Before the pandemic, my father brought a group of farmers from Aurora Farm in Houlton, to Hokkaido, Japan to meet with Japanese farmers, and learn how they grow buckwheat. Hokkaido and Maine have very similar climates, so Aurora Farm returned to Maine with Japanese buckwheat seed, and now produces buckwheat. My father purchases their buckwheat and mills it into buckwheat flour, to sell to Japanese restaurants across the country, who make their own soba, a traditional Japanese noodle dish.

This story is just one of several exchanges that positively impact our agriculture and aquaculture industries here in Maine. Supporting the Council allows for us to sustain the foundation that the Bath/Tsugaru sister city relationship has laid for more opportunities in the future.

Before you, there is a sponsor's amendment that includes changes that address the concerns we have heard thus far. The amendment decreases the number of members from 14 to 10 to allow for growth as the Council evolves. In a similar vein, the Council would be required to report back to the Governor, as well as the Legislature's committee of jurisdiction in case statutory changes need to be made.

The bill does request a general fund appropriation of \$20,000 to support the activities of the Council. Given the current budget climate, I understand the difficult decisions we all face. However, this is an important investment in this partnership due to the economic development potential and mutual benefit in fostering our continued Japan-Maine exchanges. We have an opportunity to help support the economic development of our state, and I urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1336.

Thank you for your consideration, and I would be happy to answer any questions.