

Testimony in support of LD 1336, An Act to Establish the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory
Council
April 24, 2025

Senator Curry, Representative Gere and esteemed members of the Committee on Housing and Economic development, my name is Eloise Vitelli, I am a resident of Arrowsic, and a current member of the MASSAC, having been duly appointed by Governor Mills in May 2024.

I first learned of the connection between Maine and the province of Aomori when my youngest son was in junior high school, some 20 years ago. He heard about the opportunity to visit Shriki in Japan from a friend of his who had gone the year before and decided he'd like to go.

Thus began a seemingly never-ending bottle drive to help him and his fellow travelers raise funds to support their trip. He was 14 years old when he traveled with a group of students from Bath Me to Shariki in Japan for a two week exchange. They visited temples, museums, schools, and stayed with families and learned to make Soba noodles. They visited the Cheseborough memorial that commemorates those who died when their ship wrecked during a storm in 1889, and those on shore who risked their lives to save them, a tragedy that began the relationship that persists to this day.

My son came home ever more curious and interested in the world around him, more confident, and more empathetic towards others, while also more appreciative of his home here in Maine.

In the years since, we have had occasion to join our community in hosting visitors from Shariki and supporting exchange visits on both sides. Most recently, in 2023, I participated in the dedication of the Torii Gate, a traditional Japanese design symbolizing friendship, representing a bridge between two cultures, two cities. The structure, installed in Bath's waterfront park, was built by local craftsmen to Japanese specifications.

The relationship between the province of Aomori and Maine has been reaffirmed through at least three separate executive orders, beginning in 2001 with Gov King, and reaffirmed by Gov Baldacci.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of a formal friendship between our two states and one our counterparts in Japan are looking forward to celebrating with us. This legislation will honor the bonds between us and lay a stronger foundation for our partnership and for on-going cultural and economic exchanges.

At the moment, the US is in a period of uncertainty regarding many of our traditional alliances, and long-standing trading partnerships are undergoing realignment. And while I am no better prepared than anyone to predict where these relationships will end up, I am confident that as a nation, and as a state, it is ultimately in our own best interest to forge new and renewed partnerships with communities around the globe.

Though a relatively small piece of a larger international puzzle, there is significant potential to add to the prosperity and happiness of the people of Aomori and Maine; the partnership between our two communities can play a role in rebuilding international goodwill. I urge your support of this modest request to create in statute the MASSAC and provide support to MITC for administering the Council.