

Testimony of Lloyd C. Irland

Chair, Kennebec County Budget Committee

In Support of LD 852 Act to Reduce the Property Tax Burden by Adequately Funding County Jail Operations.

Hearing, Apr 28 2025

Chairs Sen. Beebe-Center, and Rep . Hasenfus -- Thank you for holding this hearing and allowing me to speak. I am chair of the Kennebec County budget committee and also in my 6th year of serving on the Wayne Select Board. I would like to make just a few points with you today:

First, few know that 52% of the county budget is for the KCCF (jail). When you add the Sheriff and the DA's office, the total is 82%. All of these are rule bound and it is almost impossible to cut people. In fact, the KCCF and the Sheriff are understaffed which contributes to the budget for Overtime. You know of the pressures in this market.

Second, as you have already heard, the timing of the budget process is difficult. Kennebec County finishes its budget after many of the towns have finished theirs. Commissioners finalized the budget 2 weeks ago. We still don't know how much KCCF money we will get from the state for FY 2026. With 52% of the budget subject to this uncertainty, what is a budget committee to do? There has to be a solution to this timing mismatch.

In any case we are pleased that the bill before you contains a higher degree of certainty than we had before.

Third, is the rising cost of drugs and their responsible administration. The plan sounds agreeable to us at 90%, but there may be a need for a more detailed understanding of what the precise documentation of the amount will be. Then devil is in the details.

Fourth, we would point with interest to the bills considering deductions for assessed values to reduce the property tax. Why hasn't the cost of jails been getting the same attention?

This is but one example of a county funding debate that has lost its way. There is a need, possibly a Special Committee, to work on all of the aspects of county government and ask whether they are organized in a way that gives best results to taxpayers for dollars spent.

Finally, I have presided over two of the highest increases in the Kennebec County tax in recent memory. We all felt that these increases, while high, were necessary. They were not caused all by the cost of drugs in the jail, but that didn't help. All of us, as I assume you know, are municipal officials who had to go back to towns with the bad news. We feel that County wages in our county have fallen behind what they should be, and the County Commissioners agreed. This is the inevitable result of past budgets that were in fact underfunded.

In conclusion, for the above reasons we support LD 852 as drafted.

That concludes my testimony.

Thank you.