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To: Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

From: Bradley Sawyer, Deputy Director

Date: April 28, 2025

Re: Testimony Neither For Nor Against L.D. 1560, An Act to Address Conflicts of Interest with Municipal Contracts

Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. My name is Brad Sawyer, and I am the Deputy Director of the Maine Rural Water Association. The Maine Rural Water Association is a member-driven nonprofit organization based in Richmond, dedicated to providing training, technical assistance, and advocacy on behalf of our approximately three hundred members. The majority of our membership consists of water and wastewater utilities from across the state, all of whom are deeply committed to ensuring clean, safe drinking water and protecting the environment through the proper treatment of wastewater.

Many of the utilities that we serve are in small and rural communities and have a small geographic footprint and customer base. In these close-knit towns, it is not uncommon for utility boards and municipal officials to have personal or familial relationships with others involved in local operations, including those who may be called upon to assist during utility emergencies.

We recognize and support the goal of promoting transparency and accountability in municipal contracting. However, we caution that this legislation may unintentionally discourage individuals from stepping forward to assist in urgent matters. In some small towns with limited personnel and resources, the pool of qualified and available individuals could already be considered insufficient. The potential for heightened scrutiny or perceived legal exposure could further shrink that pool. This is particularly concerning in the context of emergency response, where hesitation or delay can have serious public health and safety implications.

In many small communities across Maine, it is already a significant challenge to find individuals willing and able to serve on local boards or respond to municipal needs. The creation of a new independent board—one that presumably must be entirely free of any real or perceived conflicts of interest—would pose an even greater challenge. In towns where everyone is connected by family, employment, or long-standing community ties, identifying three residents who meet such criteria may be impractical or even impossible. This could inadvertently delay essential services or place additional administrative burdens on communities that are already stretched thin.

We encourage the Committee to consider including language that accounts for the unique realities of rural communities. Perhaps an exemption or modified process for emergency contracts could provide the necessary flexibility without undermining the bill's intent.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of this important issue. I am happy to answer any questions you may have now or if you have any questions or concerns after this hearing, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at Bradley.Sawyer@MaineRWA.org or 207-737-9014.