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Testimony of Rep. Valli Geiger supporting

LD 947, An Act to Clarify Overnight Docking at Mainland Ports for Certain Island Ferry Vessels

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation

Good afternoon, Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation, my name is Valli Geiger, and I represent House District 42, which includes Criehaven Township, Matinicus Isle Plantation, Muscle Ridge Islands, North Haven, part of Owls Head and the city of Rockland. I am here today to testify as a cosponsor in support of **LD 947, An Act to Clarify Overnight Docking at Mainland Ports for Certain Island Ferry Vessels**, and as a representative who has the good fortune of representing two islands with ferry services.

The State Island Ferry Service recently shared their strategic plan for the ferry service. For the first time, they have proposed docking the ferries on the mainland, leaving the islands without emergency transport off the island and without an early morning boat. This has major implications for year-round islands.

I represent North Haven, but I consulted for several years with the Vinalhaven Health Center and my son went to middle and high school on Islesboro as a magnet student. I know island life, and I know that all communities are fragile. The islands I mentioned all have thriving year-round communities with fishermen, teachers, medical providers, retailers, craftsmen and retirees. There are families with children and elderly living in assisted living facilities. Like the rest of Maine, the islands are aging, with medical care an increasingly important component of the lives of many residents. Island life is already much more expensive than mainland living. All services and supplies have a premium cost, whether purchased on the island or bought on the mainland after a costly ferry trip.

While I understand the Ferry Service's perspective that there will be increasing costs, difficulty finding a labor force, and missed ferry trips, this is not purely a matter of logistics. I sat on a task force for over a year examining how to provide emergency medical transport off the islands if the ferries could no longer be relied on to be there for emergency trips. While there are solutions,

they are not simple, and they are very expensive. For example, Norway has 60 ambulance boats to provide emergency medical care to their many islands, but the cost of a single boat averaged \$5 million to build and \$2.5 million in operating costs for three year-round crews to provide 24/7 coverage. I was struck in the meeting by the fact that the Department of Transportation was the only state agency represented.

Maine's islands are an iconic part of our state. They have been year-round communities for hundreds of years and, while they are known as places that summer visitors and summer people "from away" come to, they are first and foremost Maine communities with schools and health clinics, town councils, fire stations, churches, grocery stores and restaurants. I was disturbed by the fact that no one was talking about the impact of this major change to island life. What tips the balance for a community to go from thriving to declining? A mill closure in central and western Maine? The loss of Loring Air Force Base in Northern Maine? The loss of security on the islands without a boat. In an age of increasing storms, it is becoming less of an idea and more of a reality that these islands could be being cut off from evacuation due to natural disasters, or a member of an island community could experience a life-threatening health complication such as a heart attack, appendicitis or a major car accident.

Before we make a major change to year-round ferry service, we need time to look at the repercussions and unintended effects. Island communities are no less a part of Maine than any other, they deserve their "roadways" and access to emergency health care, like any other. The process needs to slow down and involve more than Maine's Department of Transportation.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer questions.