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Testimony of Rep. Adam Lee presenting

LD 1756, An Act to Establish a Statewide Transportation Project Selection Prioritization Process

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts and esteemed members of the Joint Committee on Transportation, I am Adam Lee, and I represent House District 89, which is Downtown Auburn and New Auburn. I am here to introduce **LD 1756, An Act to Establish a Statewide Transportation Project Selection Prioritization Process**.

Transportation serves as the foundation of our economic and social structures. Every Mainer deserves reliable access to employment, financial resources, healthy food, exercise and socialization. Maine faces unique challenges as both a predominantly rural state and one with one of the nation's oldest populations. That means that our transportation policy decisions are affect every Mainer in each of these aspects of their lives.

Given the fundamental importance of these policy decisions, Mainers deserve to know the basis for funding particular transportation projects. This legislation is about ensuring that taxpayer dollars go to the best possible use for Maine communities. A transparent and consistent prioritization process to score and rank proposed transportation projects will reduce conflict moving forward on new projects and build public trust in transportation decision-making. This way, project selection will be based on an objective assessment of proposed projects and our limited state resources will flow to the projects that best align with regional and statewide goals. The transparency and stakeholder engagement built into the process will reduce conflict and keep competing interests from stalling needed progress.

As you know, our transportation system faces persistent funding challenges, which are being exacerbated by instability at the federal level and a significant projected funding shortfall. This affects the whole transportation system in Maine, whether roads, bridges, transit, downtown revitalization, complete streets, biking and walking corridors, or other projects. That's why we need to make smart choices with the limited dollars we have available.

Maine is also growing again. We should expect to need new transportation infrastructure, and the best time to make a good choice is at the beginning – empowering communities to propose projects that work best for them in our overall framework.

District 89: Part of Auburn

A clear prioritization system for new transportation projects will not only facilitate a smooth process for our statewide transportation agencies. It will also provide clarity for project applicants to understand the criteria that will be used to measure their proposals. Local and regional planners will be motivated to design and bring forward projects that meet the established criteria, resulting in proposals that best fit local priorities, while also supporting our statewide goals – a win-win.

The project selection criteria outlined in this legislation are modeled on the overarching goals established by the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) in their current Long-Range Transportation Plan. The aim here is not to remove and replace existing practice, but rather to use the Department's own existing statewide transportation goals as the foundation for a transparent prioritization process. The legislation also provides for flexibility to cater the prioritization process to different regions in recognition of the varied regional needs across Maine. Portland, Lewiston/Auburn, Downeast, the Western mountains, the County – we all have different needs, and this bill recognizes that.

Further, I want to emphasize that this legislation does not affect any projects that are primarily related to repair and maintenance of existing transportation infrastructure. Repaving and repairing potholes are outside the scope. Instead, it focuses on the proposals that would expand our transportation system, ensuring that new investments are consistent with the transportation goals we have set as a state.

This approach has been adopted in other states successfully. I'll give you an example. In 2014, Virginia implemented what they call "Smart Scale." The legislation to implement that program passed in their legislature unanimously, and the program has since been updated every two years to ensure that it is responsive to changing needs and technologies. I think we can learn from their approach and build a durable process for Maine that will continue to advance our transportation system regardless of changing political circumstances.

I also want to note here that I am open to reconfiguring the project selection council proposed in this bill during work session if it is not the best formation for MDOT. I understand and am sensitive to the fact that a portion of the bill may be perceived to be a means of replacing MDOT's decision-making and policy-executing role. If that part of the bill is so perceived and disrupts the possibility of building consensus, I am absolutely open to accommodating the department's concerns. The most important thing here is that an iterative process is initiated to transparently score, rank and select new transportation projects, and I am open to working with MDOT on how to best facilitate that process.

Thank you for your time, and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.