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LD 1751 “An Act to Improve the Growth Management Program Laws”

DATE OF HEARING: Thursday, May 8th, 2025

Honorable Senator Curry, Honorable Representative Gere, and Distinguished Members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee:

My name is Isabelle Oechsle. I've been a planner for six years, two of which as a freelance planning consultant. I became a consultant because, while working as a staff planner for a small town in the Midcoast, I started receiving inquiries from nearby municipalities asking if I could help their community develop a Comprehensive Plan, too. Recognizing a need, I left my full-time job and began working with many small municipalities from Pownal to Old Town on a variety of planning and economic development matters.

I grew up in Old Town and became a planner because I wanted to make people's hometowns even better places to live and work, and ensure the sustainability of Maine's communities into the future. I'm currently lucky enough to be working with my hometown on their Comprehensive Plan. The recommendations that come out of that planning process will be critical to ensure the fiscal sustainability of the community into the future after the most recent closure of a major employer. It will suggest areas where needed growth should be located and will also suggest ways to protect the unique natural resources (the rivers, domed bogs, and forests) that characterize the area – necessary components of comprehensive plans.

LD 1751 improves comprehensive planning by decreasing the municipal burden and cost of preparing these documents while preserving the essential analysis required of communities. For many years, the comprehensive planning process in Maine has been burdened by very restrictive rules governing how the state will review comprehensive plans for consistency with the growth management laws. This bill recognizes that burden, will create a tiered framework for comprehensive planning requirements, and will direct DACF to address the known issues with the Comprehensive Plan Review Criteria Rule. The purpose is to ensure flexibility with comprehensive planning for even the most under-resourced municipalities.

Flexibility is needed in the comprehensive planning process. Many small or under-staffed communities attempt to do this with only a volunteer committee responsible for the collection and interpretation of data. I have twice been called in as a consultant after these volunteers spun their wheels in years of monthly meetings (one time it was two years, the most recent time it was four). In both instances, the most recently adopted plans were well past their state consistency findings. The struggle lies in the first phase of the planning process, the state's required “inventories.” As a consultant, this is one of my most expensive phases of the project – and, for the most part, it occurs before I've even met a Comprehensive Plan Committee or had any interaction with the public.

LD 1751 will ensure that comprehensive planning is not a one-size-fits-all, standardized approach. It addresses the current major flaw, the rules governing comprehensive planning in the state. It will also encourage regional or multi-municipal plans, ensuring that growth and development are directed to communities with sewer and water available. This regional approach also allows communities to work together to share in the cost of holding public engagement events and paying professionals to recommend solutions that align with the community's vision (the most important parts of the planning process).

Maine's professional planners have worked for many months in support of this bill. As practitioners doing this work with our communities, we have been working directly to create comprehensive plans consistent with the state's rules while understanding that they are flawed. This bill will allow us to help even more communities – the reason that I became a consultant in the first place.

Sincerely,

Isabelle Oechsle
Owner + Principal Planner
IOV Community Planning + Consulting