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2026
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**Testimony of Nancy Smith, CEO of GrowSmart Maine
in support of LD 2164, An Act To Assist Communities With
Converting Vacant School Buildings Into Housing**

February 10, 2026

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development,

GrowSmart Maine is a statewide non-partisan non-profit organization helping communities navigate change in alignment with smart growth. We advocate for smart growth policies and investments, share in thought leadership, host convenings, and provide technical assistance for smart growth practices and outcomes.

MRLBA provides valuable programming to assist communities in transforming abandoned or obsolete properties back to economic and community assets. But communities need so much more. LD 2164 frames key technical expertise such as engineering and evaluation, as well as updating zoning and ordinances, to remove barriers for old schools to become new housing. When those steps indicate a housing project will be appropriate, LD 2164 also provides access to a relatively small amount of the funds needed to complete the capital stack; to finance the redevelopment.

For many schools, this public investment is an essential step before the private sector can redevelop schools that are no longer in use. In so doing, this process builds on prior public investments.

Redeveloping schools into housing is smart growth in both location and reuse of existing buildings. And the timing is critical.

★ Location: retired school buildings are often in downtowns and village centers, so redevelopment for housing provides residents with easy access for daily living activities and social connections.

★ Reusing these buildings is an efficient and cost-effective development strategy over new construction on open land. Mainers have deep personal connections to these buildings; I've seen it in Ellsworth, where the Moore School is now the very active Moore Community Center, and in Monmouth where my daughter was the third generation to graduate from Monmouth

Academy, and now that building is being redeveloped for its next use. This love of place

often means a greater acceptance and often enthusiasm for saving these buildings for reuse as housing, while other proposals may face opposition.

- ★ This is not a request for ongoing funding, but a single allocation to address the current and near future needs of communities. There are approximately thirty schools currently available for their next purpose, and double that expected in the near future. The timing of this investment will have lasting benefit across Maine.

This proposal will allow towns to keep more retired schools at the heart of their communities, and we encourage the committee to support LD 2164.