

STATE OF MAINE LEGISLATURE

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Testimony of Maine Redevelopment Land Bank Authority In Support of LD 2164

Public Hearing — 10 February, 2026

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is Gabe Gauvin, I am the Programs Manager at, and I am testifying on behalf of, the Maine Redevelopment Land Bank Authority (Maine Redevelopment) in support of LD 2164.

Over the past several years, Maine Redevelopment has conducted listening sessions with communities across the state. A consistent message has emerged: municipalities are struggling to reposition vacant school buildings once they close. Many communities must navigate redevelopment largely on their own, often without staff capacity, technical expertise, or clarity regarding resources and best practices. These properties are typically recognizable community anchors, yet their scale and configuration create complexity and sometimes significant reuse challenges.

To better understand those challenges, Maine Redevelopment partnered with the Midcoast Council of Governments to pilot school reuse planning and develop a toolkit of replicable best practices to be implemented statewide. We observed that communities strongly desire productive reuse of their school facilities, yet the longer a building remains vacant, the less likely successful reuse becomes. Barriers exist at two levels. Communities are often under-resourced and require assistance with consensus building, scenario planning, due diligence, and feasibility assessment. They also face funding gaps when transitioning from planning to implementation, particularly in rural regions, and especially where housing production is concerned.

LD 2164 provides a pragmatic response to these challenges. The proposed School Reuse Program includes two integrated elements. First, technical assistance is delivered through Maine Redevelopment, regional councils and planning organizations, utilizing a best practices toolkit. Second, the establishment of the Maine School Conversion Fund to close capital expenditure gaps for communities who choose to pursue housing reuse in their former school facilities.

The fund is intentionally flexible. Resources may be used at multiple stages of the redevelopment life cycle. This is in recognition that early investment can de-risk a project and increase viability. The housing outcomes will be decided and designed through local

stakeholder partnership to reflect community needs rather than uniform mandates. Eligible projects may include senior housing, missing middle housing, or other residential forms across attainable price ranges. Administration of the fund will be conducted using Maine Redevelopment's existing operational capacity so that programmatic funding remains focused on project outcomes. Communities will engage with Maine Redevelopment and participate through a memorandum of understanding process and become eligible for capital support upon completion of the planning process and identification of housing as a viable reuse scenario.

The timing of LD 2164 is important. Approximately two dozen former school properties are currently vacant statewide representing an even geographic spread. Demographic trends indicate closures will continue. This list stands to grow dramatically over the next 3 to 5 years. Providing planning tools and resources now allows municipalities to respond proactively and deliver housing more efficiently.

Maine Redevelopment exists to help communities return obsolete properties to productive use. Our statewide scope, technical expertise, and legislative mandate position us to administer this program consistently and effectively.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

FEBRUARY 2026

PREPARING FOR POSSIBILITY

MAINE REDEVELOPMENT

PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITIES TO REVITALIZE PROPERTIES AND REIMAGINE THEIR POTENTIAL FOR MAINE'S FUTURE.

REVITALIZING VACANT SCHOOLS

A PRACTICAL HOUSING SOLUTION FOR MAINE COMMUNITIES

Across Maine, retired school buildings are among the most common forms of publicly owned vacant property, with at least 23 currently vacant statewide, including 15 closures since 2024. These closures reflect enrollment declines, safety concerns, and budget pressures, not local mismanagement, yet municipalities inherit complex buildings through town vote with limited time and capacity to respond. At a time when Maine's housing shortage demands new solutions and coordinated state action, LD 2164 addresses both challenges, providing a clear framework with consistent tools, early-action planning support, and access to funds while enabling Maine Redevelopment to partner with municipalities to position former schools for viable housing.

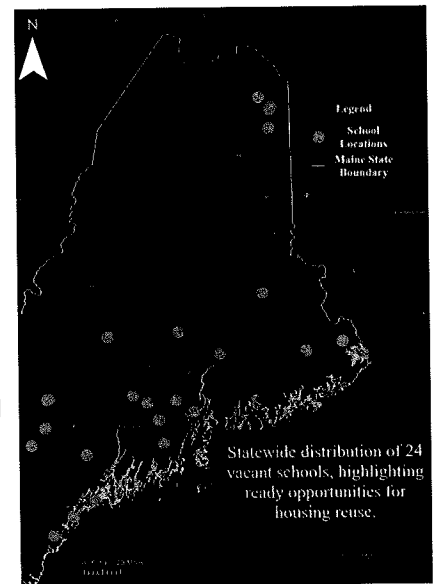


A TRUSTED STEWARD FOR A STATEWIDE SOLUTION

As Maine's statutorily created land bank, Maine Redevelopment serves as a responsible steward, providing professional oversight, consistent standards, direct municipal partnerships, and accountability for public investment. Through its partnership with Midcoast Council of Governments, Maine Redevelopment is piloting school reuse in Liberty and Brooks, informing a scalable toolkit for statewide use. This approach supports early, flexible, community-driven outcomes rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.



maineredevelopment.com



WHY SCHOOLS ARE WELL SUITED FOR HOUSING

Former schools are often centrally located within walking distance of key services, making them strong candidates for housing. Their durable construction, existing public investment, and access to infrastructure create opportunity, but without upfront support most projects do not pencil out, leaving vacancy, ongoing municipal cost, and lost community value.

Area Within a 15-Minute Walk of Morse Memorial School, Brooks



Tuck O'Brien, Executive Director



tobrien@maineredevelopment.org



(207)553-0255



Prepare for Possibility

LD 2164 Testimony - February 10, 2026

The Problem *School Reuse*

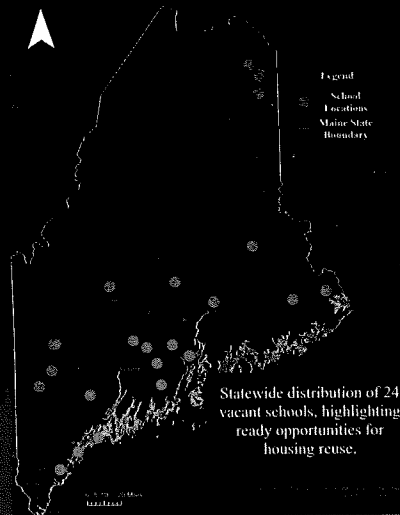
School closures leave municipalities with costly and complex reuse challenges of these once essential assets and many communities lack the capacity to respond.

Demographic shifts and rising costs are expected to increase school closures in coming years, adding to the number of vacant and deteriorating buildings statewide.



Identification *School Reuse*

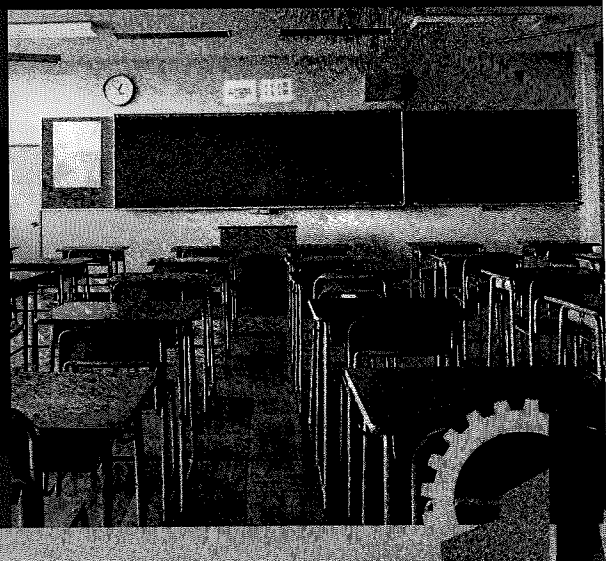
- 24 schools vacant statewide
- 15 schools closed since 2024
- 3 schools demolished no longer viable for reuse



- Albion - 20 School Street, Albion
- Biddford - 64 West Street, Biddford
- Bingham - 263 Main Street, Bingham
- Bradley - 55 Highland Avenue, Bradley
- Brooks - 27 School Street, Brooks
- Caribou - 59 Glenn Street, Caribou
- Caribou - 19 Marshall Avenue, Caribou
- Charleston - 1182 Dover Road, Charleston
- Charlotte - 1006 Ayers Junction Road, Charlotte
- Fairfield - 63 High Street, Fairfield
- Harpswell - 9 Ash Point Road, Harpswell
- Liberty - 33 West Main Street, Liberty
- Mexico - 21 Cross Street, Mexico
- New Sweden - 113 Westmanland Road, New Sweden
- Presque Isle - 1 Skyspot Lane, Presque Isle
- Rumford - 121 Lincoln Avenue, Rumford
- Sabattus - 36 No Name Pond Road, Sabattus
- Searsport - 5 Church Street, Searsport
- South Portland - 240 Ocean St., South Portland
- Springfield - 883 Main Street, Springfield
- Waterford - 148 Valley Road, Waterford
- Wesley - 13 Whining Pines, Wesley
- West Paris - 170 Main Street, W. Paris
- Union, 51 S Union Road, Union

What we learned *School Reuse*

- Strong desire to put schools back to use
- Capacity to manage reuse constrained in rural areas
- Lack of consistent, accessible resources for communities
- Inconsistent processes across districts and regions
- Housing reuse is often a viable or desired option
- Schools offer opportunities and challenges for housing reuse
- Policy intervention can enable school reuse and support housing statewide



The Challenges *School Reuse*

- School-specific layouts limit reuse
- Costly design and construction
- Aging systems and infrastructure
- Ongoing maintenance costs while vacant
- Environmental risks
- Long timelines before reuse is viable
- Zoning, code, and financing hurdles



The Opportunity *School Reuse*

- Schools hold a valued place in community
- Strong community support for reuse
- Durable buildings with flexible layouts
- Public investment already in place
- Reuse of existing structure aligns with smart growth principles
- Historic value, often eligible for National Register listing, tax credits, and other incentive programs



Reuse Toolkit

School Reuse

In partnership with Midcoast Council of Governments, we're developing a toolkit to help municipalities plan and repurpose retired school buildings.

This toolkit will guide communities toward efficient, community-driven reuse strategies statewide.



Toolkit

School Reuse

Assessment of Municipal Capacity

Evaluation of Existing Site Conditions

Community Involvement Plan

Assessment of Feasible Reuse Strategies

Capital Stack Development

Implementation

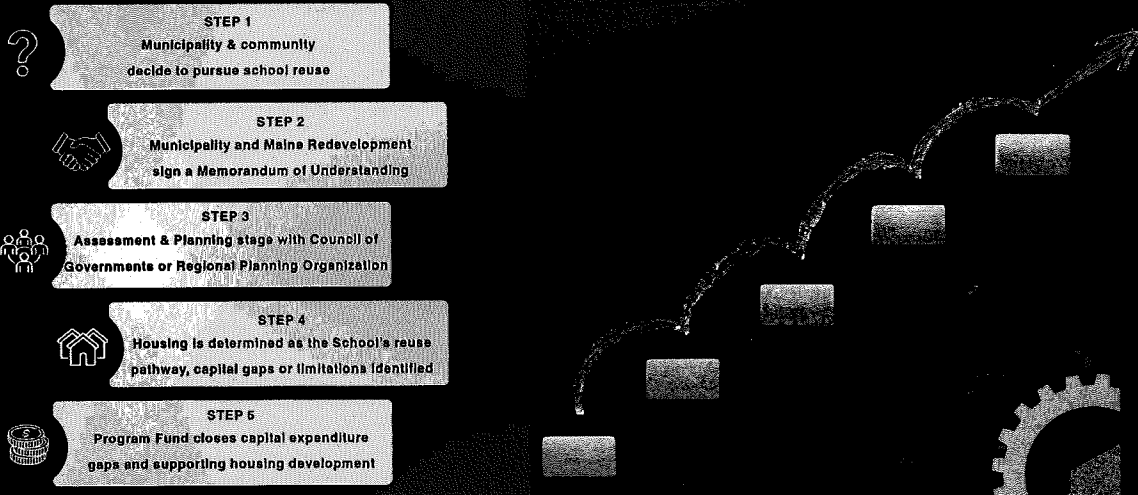


LD 2164 *School Reuse*

Provides resources

- o Communities decide
- o Regardless of size or location
- o Consistent tools
- o Technical assistance
- o Access to funds

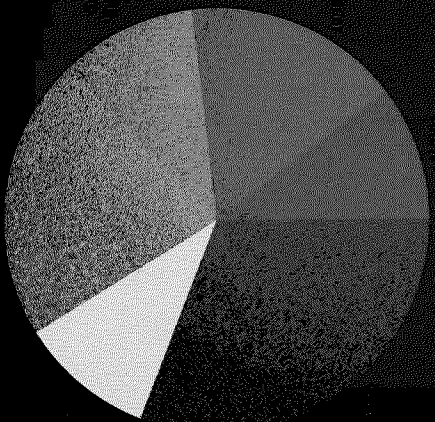
LD 2164 Process *School Reuse*



Financials

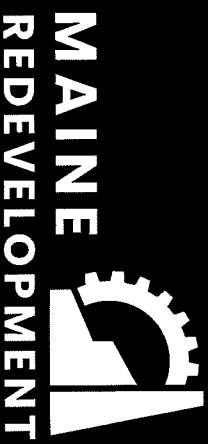
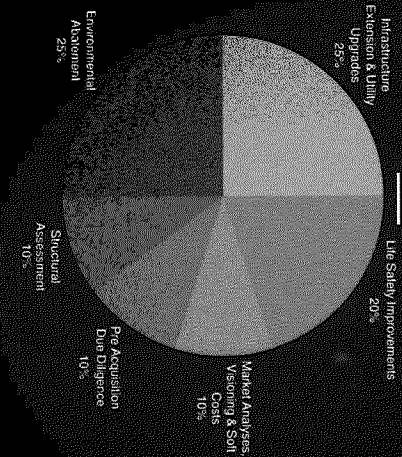
School Raise

School Conversion Capital Stack



Proposed Bill Funding

Uses



Thank you



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City of Presque Isle, Maine

The Office of
City Manager
Sonja Eyer

Email: seyler@presqueisleme.us

To: Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development
From: Sonja Eyer, City Manager for the City of Presque Isle
Re: Support for LD 2164 – An Act to Assist Communities with Converting Vacant School Buildings into Housing

Date: February 5, 2026

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the City of Presque Isle, we write in support of LD 2164, *An Act to Assist Communities with Converting Vacant School Buildings into Housing*.

Like many Maine municipalities, the City of Presque Isle has inherited one or more former school buildings following closure and transfer through the school consolidation process. LD 2164 is particularly timely, as our community is possibly facing another facility closure and transfer in the very near future.

These buildings are often centrally located, structurally durable, and deeply valued by our community. At the same time, they present significant challenges related to cost, complexity, environmental concerns, and limited local capacity to evaluate and pursue viable reuse.

LD 2164 recognizes the realities municipalities face. It provides a practical, voluntary framework that allows communities to partner with Maine Redevelopment to receive early technical assistance, project coordination, and access to targeted funds to evaluate and advance housing reuse,

The dedicated funding included in this bill is essential to making reuse feasible. Without upfront resources for feasibility analysis, environmental assessment, and site preparation, most former school buildings remain vacant, leading to continued deterioration, rising municipal carrying costs, and missed housing opportunities. The funding proposed in LD 2164 is targeted to remove these early barriers so properties can be responsibly positioned for redevelopment rather than become long-term liabilities.

Maine is facing a well-documented housing shortage that affects communities of all sizes. Meeting the State's goal to create 80,000 new units of housing will require a mix of new construction and the reuse of existing public assets. Former school buildings represent one of the most practical and near-term opportunities to add housing while reducing long-term municipal burden.

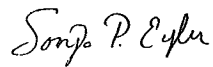
For smaller communities particularly, the challenges of navigating regulatory requirements, environmental conditions, and developer interest can stall projects for years. LD 2164 fills a critical gap by pairing coordinated expertise through a trusted statewide partner with capital support.

We believe this approach will help unlock housing opportunities across Maine while respecting the financial and administrative limits of local governments. For communities like ours, LD 2164 offers a realistic path forward where few currently exist.

For these reasons, the **City of Presque Isle** urges the Legislature to support LD 2164 and thanks the sponsor and committee for advancing a thoughtful, community-driven solution to two pressing challenges: vacant public buildings and Maine's housing shortage.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Sincerely,



Sonja Eyler
City Manager
City of Presque Isle
seyler@presqueisleme.us



To: Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development
From: Northern Maine Development Commission
Re: Support for LD 2164 – Vacant School Housing Conversion Program
Date: February 3, 2026

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Northern Maine Development Commission, we write in strong support of LD 2164, *An Act to Assist Communities with Converting Vacant School Buildings into Housing*.

As an organization that serves municipalities across Aroostook County and northern Maine, we regularly see the challenges communities face when school buildings are closed and transferred to municipal ownership. Former schools are often centrally located, structurally durable, and valued community assets. Yet they also present significant hurdles, including high upfront costs, environmental concerns, regulatory complexity, and limited local capacity to evaluate and advance reuse.

LD 2164 responds directly to these realities. It establishes a practical, voluntary framework that enables municipalities to partner with Maine Redevelopment to access technical assistance, coordinated project support, and targeted funding to evaluate and advance housing reuse. The dedicated funding included in this bill is essential to making reuse feasible. Without upfront resources for feasibility analysis, environmental assessment, and site preparation, some former school buildings remain vacant for years. This leads to continued deterioration, increased municipal carrying costs, and lost opportunities to address local housing needs.

The funding proposed in LD 2164 is targeted to remove these barriers so properties can be positioned for redevelopment rather than becoming long-term liabilities. Removing these early phase capital expenditures to determine a site's potential for reuse empowers municipalities to market their properties more effectively and de-risk future private investments.

Maine is facing a well-documented housing shortage that affects communities of all sizes. Meeting the State's goal to create 80,000 new housing units will require a mix of new construction and the reuse of existing public assets. Former school buildings represent one of the most practical and near-term opportunities to contribute to housing supply while reducing long-term municipal burden.

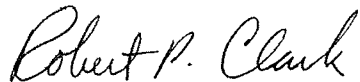
For smaller and rural communities in particular—including many in northern Maine that we serve—limited staff capacity and the complexity of environmental, financial, and regulatory requirements can stall projects indefinitely. LD 2164 fills a critical gap by pairing coordinated expertise through a trusted statewide partner with capital support, without shifting new mandates or responsibilities onto municipalities.

We believe this approach will meaningfully support communities across Maine, help unlock housing opportunities, and align state investment with municipal capacity. For these reasons, Northern Maine Development Commission urges the Legislature to support LD 2164 and we thank the sponsor and

committee for advancing a thoughtful, community-driven solution to vacant public buildings and Maine's housing shortage.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Clark
Executive Director
Northern Maine Development Commission



To: Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development
From: Aroostook Partnership
Re: Support for LD 2164 – Vacant School Housing Conversion Program
Date: 05 February 2026

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kiersten S. Purington and I am the President & CEO of the Aroostook Partnership in Caribou, ME. The Aroostook Partnership is a unique private/public consortium of over 65 businesses, the Northern Maine Development Commission, County higher education institutions, and several regional non-profit organizations. Our mission is to ensure the economic strength, growth, and resiliency of Aroostook County.

On behalf of the Aroostook Partnership, I am writing in strong support of **LD 2164**, *An Act to Assist Communities with Converting Vacant School Buildings into Housing*.

As an organization that works closely with municipalities across Aroostook County, we regularly see the challenges communities face when school buildings are closed and transferred to municipal ownership. Former schools are often centrally located, structurally durable, and valued community assets. Yet they also present significant hurdles, including high upfront costs, environmental concerns, regulatory complexity, and limited local capacity to evaluate and advance reuse.

Additionally, the housing crisis remains a very real challenge in Aroostook County. With limited availability of housing stock, aging infrastructure, and skyrocketing costs, Aroostook County residents struggle to find affordable and accessible housing across all income levels. Reuse and refurbishment of existing structures, including the conversion of vacant school buildings, remains a viable solution to addressing this crisis in northern Maine and other rural parts of the state.

LD 2164 responds directly to both of these realities and establishes a practical, voluntary framework that enables municipalities to partner with Maine Redevelopment to access technical assistance, coordinated project support, and targeted funding to evaluate and advance housing reuse. The dedicated funding included in this bill is essential to making reuse feasible. Without upfront resources for feasibility analysis, environmental assessment, and site preparation, many former school buildings remain vacant for years. This leads to continued deterioration, increased municipal carrying costs, and lost opportunities to address local housing needs.



www.aroostookpartnership.org

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The funding proposed in **LD 2164** is targeted at removing these barriers so properties can be positioned for redevelopment rather than becoming long-term liabilities. Removing these early phase capital expenditures to determine a site's potential for reuse empowers municipalities to market their properties more effectively and de-risk future private investments. Maine is facing a well-documented housing shortage that affects communities of all sizes. Meeting the State's goal of creating **80,000 new housing units** will require a mixture of new construction and the reuse of existing public assets. Former school buildings represent one of the most practical and near-term opportunities to contribute to housing supply while reducing long-term municipal burden.

For smaller and rural communities in particular, like Aroostook County, limited staff capacity and the complexity of environmental, financial, and regulatory requirements can stall projects indefinitely. **LD 2164** fills a critical gap by pairing coordinated expertise through a trusted statewide partner with capital support, without shifting new mandates or responsibilities onto municipalities.

We believe this approach will meaningfully support communities across Maine and especially in Aroostook County where there are already available vacant schools that are poised for redevelopment into desperately needed housing. The approach also aligns state investment with municipal capacity. For these reasons, the Aroostook Partnership urges the Legislature to support **LD 2164** and we thank the sponsor and committee for advancing a thoughtful, community-driven solution to vacant public buildings and Maine's housing shortage.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

Sincerely,



Kiersten S. Purington, PhD, MBA
President & CEO
Aroostook Partnership
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207.554.0680

