



## Maine Municipal Association

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### Testimony of the Maine Municipal Association

#### Neither For Nor Against

#### LD 324- *An Act To Limit Public Land Ownership in Maine*

March 5, 2021

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Senator Dill, Representative O’Neil and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Rebecca Graham and I am presenting testimony neither for nor against of LD 324 at the direction of MMA’s 70-member Legislative Policy Committee.

Municipal officials value the effort that has created spaces for public enjoyment in the outdoors in many towns and cities. These properties often have high value for their scenic views, and natural resources that often once belonged to a single individual. In many cases, the pursuit of public lands protects important historic recreation areas for communities that could be threatened by development.

Additionally, the use of public ownership of lands is an even greater tool for many coastal and inland waterway communities to address increased flooding and coastal inundation, allowing them to leverage future funding assistance for managed retreat from harm for businesses and residents.

That said, the public lands process leaves many struggling rural communities underwater fiscally as it removes significant revenue off the tax rolls and shifts the burden on to an aging population on fixed incomes who lack the capacity to shoulder the increased financial strain.

The goals of this legislation are laudable, responding to this inequity amongst communities, and providing an opportunity for the Committee to explore ways to address the property tax burden problem that lies at the heart of land use programs. While some non-profit land preservation entities work well with communities and continue to make payments in lieu of taxes or enroll in a current use program, rather than take advantage of a complete exemption , many others do not, and leverage their non-profit status to shift that burden on to other property taxpayers.

Some communities are involved in this process and fully accept the burden shift while others have had limited involvement in the discussion that can take place between private owners and the non-profit who later assumes ownership.

As drafted, the 50% county threshold could leave some communities in jeopardy without a tool to move or protect their residents away from harm due to increased flooding or simply strip them of the ability to promote locally desired economic development centered around public land.

Rather than limiting the amount of land that can be set aside for public use, officials ask this committee to use this bill to address the problems within the current system. Some options that could be explored are a state refund of the loss revenue for lands set aside for statewide use or a mechanism to ensure that future lands set aside for the purpose provide a tangible and equal benefit for the loss revenue to the communities proportional to the loss. Additionally, a mandatory local referendum requirement for lands purchased with public money by the communities that shoulder the loss in local revenue could be considered.