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Testimony of Rep. Maggie O'Neil sponsoring

LD 700, An Act To Promote Economic Development and Outdoor Recreation Through Investment in State Parks

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

Good morning, Senator Dill and fellow members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture Conservation and Forestry, I am Representative Maggie O'Neil of Saco, and I am pleased to present **LD 700, An Act To Promote Economic Development and Outdoor Recreation Through Investment in State Parks**. This bill offers an opportunity to create an ongoing source of funding for much-needed investments in one of Maine's most precious assets, our state park system. I am bringing it forward at a time when more Mainers and visitors than ever are interested in what the state parks have to offer.

As this committee knows, the Bureau of Parks and Lands manages 48 state parks and historic sites across the state, from the 92-mile Allagash Wilderness Waterway to Fort McClary in Kittery, where Vice President Hannibal Hamlin served in the Civil War; and from Grafton Notch, home of Screw Augur Falls, Moose Cave, and Table Rock to Quoddy Head, the easternmost point in the United States, with its iconic candy-striped lighthouse.

The parks and historic sites are gems. They are each different, and thus offer a wide range of experiences. Within their boundaries you can dig a peck of clams, navigate Class II rapids, or summit a mountain. You might spot a moose or a whale, hear a loon, catch a Brook Trout or a Striped Bass. If you and your family have told stories around a campfire, picnicked in a beautiful spot, or cooled off on a hot day, you know that state parks are places where memories are made.

In 2020, more than 3 million visitors flocked to the parks, setting a new record. Especially during the pandemic, they sought beauty and solace, a place to connect safely with friends and family, and an affordable place to relax and refresh their spirits. To do that, they bought sunscreen and bug spray, gasoline and propane, coolers, beach towels, and sandwiches, contributing more than \$100 million to our economy.

As former state parks employees, Rep. Skolfield and I can tell you that in return for a relatively modest fee, visitors get a great experience: friendly staff, clean bathrooms, and the chance to be

outside in a beautiful place. The Bureau of Parks and Lands prides itself on providing a great experience at an accessible cost, as it has for more than 85 years.

While the scenery in our parks is stellar, the infrastructure is showing its age. All infrastructure requires investment from time to time, and sites that greet more than 3 million people in a year see a lot of wear and tear. While dedicated staff have made the best of limited resources for years, the parks have received only sporadic capital investment, resulting in an estimated \$50 million maintenance backlog. LD 700 is one tool to create an ongoing source of funding for maintenance needs.

Here's what the bill would do:

This bill would cap the amount of money directed to the General Fund from state parks entrance fees at \$4.5 million, allowing any revenue above that amount to accrue to a non-lapsing account for the purposes of reinvestment in capital.

The need is great, and includes (a) crumbling roads and parking lots, (b) deteriorating bathhouses and other structures, (c) inadequate staff housing, and (d) numerous structures out of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. To be clear, any revenue LD 700 would produce are not a substitute for the much-needed larger investments that a bond question could support. Yet having an ongoing source of funding for capital repairs would help to prevent the kind of backlog of structural deterioration that we are facing now. Importantly, it could be used as match to draw down federal Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars, meaning our state monies could go further.

Millions of Americans have taken up outdoor activities in the past year. As the pandemic eases and travel restrictions are lifted, they will have a choice about where to enjoy their time and spend their tourism dollars. Visitors from southern New England make up the majority of our tourists, but they can travel to Vermont, New Hampshire, or Canada as easily as to Maine. We would be wise to invest in our state parks and historic sites to ensure that we can continue to offer a top-notch experience and meet the expectations of today's visitors.

I hope you'll join me in helping to make that possible by supporting LD 700. Thank you, and I look forward to working with you on this important challenge.