



Maine County Commissioners Association

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LD 756, An Act to Provide Funding for Positions in the Penobscot County Sheriff's Office

March 13, 2023

Chair Beebe-Center, Chair Salisbury, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, my name is Stephen Gorden and in addition to serving as a member of the board of commissioners for Cumberland County, I am writing today in my role as chair of the legislative policy committee of the Maine County Commissioners Association. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee *neither for nor against* LD 756. Briefly, as with LD 799, we support the intent of the bill, but we believe this issue cuts across all Maine counties and should be part of a statewide solution.

About MCCA. Briefly, the Maine County Commissioners Association was established in 1890 to assist Maine's county government in providing vital services to Maine citizens in a responsive, efficient, and credible manner. The Association is based in Augusta, represents all 16 of Maine's counties, and is governed by a board with representation from each participating county.

Discussion. Since the very beginning of the Maine State Police service, state troopers have had the important function and duty of patrolling Maine's highways. They have done, and continue to do, an excellent job. However, as time has gone on, the mission of the Maine State Police has expanded in ways that also benefit Maine people, but a consequence of this expanded mission is that fewer state police officers have been available for highway patrol. A lack of state funding, and hiring challenges, has also hampered the ability of the Maine State Police to keep up with highway patrol, particularly in the rural areas of Maine like Penobscot County.

Over time, partly as a result of local desire for expanded highway patrol, and partly to backfill patrol services previously provided by the Maine State Police, county sheriff departments have picked up a greater share of highway and rural patrol. In some of the more urban counties, the vast bulk of highway patrol is provided by sheriff deputies. In Maine's more rural counties, there is a mix of coverage by county sheriff departments and the Maine State Police.

This bill raises an important issue: to what degree should important rural and highway patrol services be provided by the Maine State Police, which is funded by state taxpayers, and to what degree should such services be provided by county deputies, who are funded by local property taxpayers. An even broader question is: what level of service do we want, particularly since demand for services seems to be going up, not down.

LD 756 provides a glimpse into this issue from the lens of a single Maine county that has very rural parts: Penobscot County. If approved, it would call for a General Fund appropriation beginning in fiscal year 2023-24 to the Department of Public Safety for the Penobscot County Sheriff's Office to hire six new patrol positions.

However, as noted earlier, rural patrol is not just a Penobscot County issue. It is a statewide issue impacting all Maine counties, particular our most rural ones. For this reason, MCCA does not believe the solution is to pass a bill that only addresses one county. In making this statement, we want to make clear that we do not oppose a solution that includes Penobscot County; however, we want to make sure all counties are addressed by any solution.

Comments of MCCA re LD 756

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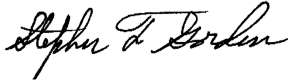
As it turns out, our Association has been working with multiple stakeholders over the past year on this important issue of rural patrol. We have engaged with sheriffs, municipalities, the Department of Public Safety, and others to better understand the needs and challenges of different groups, and all agree that there is a problem. What has not emerged is a clear solution. With this in mind, the Association worked with Rep. Anne Graham who has submitted LD 630, *An Act to Ensure Rural Law Enforcement Services in Maine*, which is a concept draft allowing for stakeholders to identify the level of rural patrol needed, who is best-positioned to provide that service, and then determine how such services should be paid for. A General Fund appropriation to pay for local sheriff service is certainly one possible solution. There may be others, and we are open to exploring them.

Ultimately, because county commissioners are responsible for the cost of the sheriff's office in every county, our members are very cognizant of the burden placed on local property taxpayers who pay for such services. With this in mind, we are motivated to look very carefully at all options, including options that provide relief to local property taxpayers.

In sum, we appreciate the intent and spirit behind LD 756, and we very much understand the challenges being confronted in Penobscot County. However, we believe that any solution undertaken by the Legislature must be statewide and address each of Maine's impacted counties.

Conclusion. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on this bill, and if you have questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to let us know.

Respectfully submitted,



Stephen Gorden
Chair, Legislative Policy Committee

cc: Commissioner Richard A. Dutremble, President, MCCA
James I. Cohen, Verrill Dana, LLP, MCCA Legislative Counsel