

James Haller
Orono

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and other members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is James Haller, Jr. of Orono, ME, and I am submitting testimony on behalf of myself in support of LD 1391, An Act To Enhance the Educational Expertise and Knowledge of the Board of Trustees of the University of Maine System.

I attended the University of Maine as an undergraduate student, where I obtained a B.S. in Engineering Physics, along with a concentration in Mechanical Engineering and a Minor in Mathematics. After spending some time touring the country post-graduation, I returned to Maine to begin my engineering career.

I now work as a full-time staff member at UMaine's Advanced Structures and Composites Center, one of the leading research facilities here in our state. I am thrilled to be working as a Research Engineer for the ASCC, however, occasionally I get concerned about the status of the University System; in particular, choices made without proper guidance by the University System's Board of Trustees.

You may recall a time last summer, in the midst of the pandemic, that the Board of Trustees made a unilateral decision to change the status of Retiree's health care coverage. While this didn't immediately affect me as a young engineer, it was extremely discouraging to hear this news. The affected retirees had worked for years for the University System, and through our Labor Union's contract negotiations had earned the right to remain on the University affiliated health care plans post-retirement. However, the Board of Trustees obtained a lawyer who decided that since these retirees were no longer active union members, this unilateral decision to change their health care status was not subject to bargaining agreements.

As a new staff member (having worked for the University system for just 11 months now), this is downright discouraging. What's the point of working for such a system for decades, just to watch a disconnected Board of Trustees make a disjointed decision based on faulty data from a single hired lawyer to change health care plans down the road and lose out on benefits that were promised for decades?

As such, I believe it is imperative that University employees have a voice (ideally multiple) on the Board of Trustees. Even as a student, I could often see the disconnect between day-to-day operations of the University and the overarching guidance of the Board. This disconnect has only become more obvious now that I am a full time staff member.

With this in mind, I strongly encourage the committee to endorse the passage of LD 1391 - An Act To Enhance the Educational Expertise and Knowledge of the Board of Trustees of the University of Maine System, in order to protect the interests and negotiated rights of those of us who devote our time and energy to the University System, its students, and our great State of Maine.

Cordially,
James Haller, Jr.