



SUIT UP MAINE

May 20, 2021

Sen. Lawrence, Rep. Berry, and Honorable members of the Committee on Energy, Utilities, and Technology:

My name is Kelli Whitlock Burton and I am a resident of Waldoboro. I offer this testimony in support of LD 1708, An Act To Create the Pine Tree Power Company, a Nonprofit Utility, To Deliver Lower Rates, Reliability and Local Control for Maine Energy Independence, on behalf of Suit Up Maine, an independent, all-volunteer constituent action group representing more than 5,000 Mainers in all 16 counties.

Of all the bills we have supported over the past four years, this is by far one of the most creative—and timely. Creating a consumer-owned utility will accomplish what Maine’s investor-owned utilities will never do: Put control of Maine’s energy future in the hands of Mainers. Pine Tree Power would not only better position us to meet our climate and renewable energy goals, this endeavor would also provide Mainers with a more affordable, reliable electric utility. As a customer of Central Maine Power (CMP) myself, I have first-hand experience with the kind of poor customer service and unreliability that has earned CMP the rating of “worst in the nation” for customer satisfaction for three years running.¹ CMP is a frequent flyer before the Public Utilities Commission, which has launched numerous investigations over CMP’s continued overcharging of customers² and mishandling of solar projects.³ They were also recently called out by the state’s public advocate about issuing disconnect notices in the winter of 2019.⁴ This track record speaks volumes about how the company views its customers: We are not as important as their bottom line. That’s a problem inherent in the investor-owned model.

Pine Tree Power would change all of that. And contrary to the information you may have received from CMP and Versant, the Pine Tree Power model has been tried and tested by more than 2,000 companies in 49 states that provide electricity to more than 49 million Americans. We don’t have to look far for proof that COUs work. About 100 communities in Maine are currently served by consumer-owned utilities, which provide

¹ J.D. Power Electric Utility Business Customer Satisfaction Study for 2020 <https://bit.ly/341ncWg>, 2019 <https://bit.ly/3bHbmoi> and 2018 <https://bit.ly/3f5LQv0>.

² Portland Press Herald archive. <https://www.pressherald.com/cmp-investigation/>.

³ Associated Press, April 7, 2021. <https://bit.ly/2ScMj5L>.

⁴ Portland Press Herald, January 18, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2Qzyspt>.

their customers with cheaper, more reliable service. Unlike for-profit companies such as CMP and Versant, COUs are owned by and are accountable to their customers, not investors. Pine Tree Power would be run by a board elected by Maine voters, further ensuring the company's accountability to the people it serves. No state funds would be used for the purchase of the poles, lines, and other systems currently owned by CMP and Versant, or for Pine Tree Power's operation. And LD 1708 also ensures that existing CMP and Versant employees would keep their jobs without cuts to their pay or pensions. This is a bill whose time has come. And it's one that your constituents want.

On a personal note, the utility company that provided service to the Ohio town where my family lived before moving to Maine, South Central Power, was a nonprofit, member-owned cooperative, similar to what bill sponsors envision for Pine Tree Power. We had significantly fewer power outages, faster restoration when we did lose power, superior customer service, and lower rates than friends and family served by investor-owned American Electric Power. We know from personal experience that the utility model of Pine Tree Power works, and works better than investor-owned utilities.

I urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1708. Thank you.

Kelli Whitlock Burton
Co-Leader, Suit Up Maine