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Testimony of the Maine Municipal Association

Neither For Nor Against

LD 1 - An Act to Increase Storm Preparedness for Maine's Communities, Homes and Infrastructure

February 11, 2025

Sen. Curry, Rep. Gere and esteemed members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee, my name is Rebecca Graham, and I am submitting testimony neither for nor against LD 1, *An Act to Increase Storm Preparedness for Maine's Communities, Homes and Infrastructure*, at the direction of MMA's Legislative Policy Committee (LPC).

As you are aware, our LPC is composed of municipal officials from across Maine, elected by their peers to represent communities with vastly different enforcement staff, resources and capacities. Officials appreciate the forward-thinking support this bill creates to help homeowners improve their building resilience and ability to weather future storms in Part A and supports communities with the ability to leverage additional funding to improve or move critical infrastructure in Part B of the bill.

The Safeguarding Tomorrow Risk Mitigation Revolving Loan Fund will make a critical difference for small communities and their ability to leverage larger funding resources like federal grants with matching community fund requirements. Sewer treatment plants and pumping stations are naturally constructed in areas close to water resources and most were built without information regarding the risks facing the facilities today. In some cases, even federal grant programs allow only for identical replacement of storm damaged infrastructure and not projects that might use larger or more expensive culvert designs to withstand future storms. Officials deeply appreciate the state's commitment to fill these gaps and raise the capacity of all communities through the program established in Part B.

Part A of the bill could also be a significant program to help communities with supporting their residents, particularly in reducing the cost and increasing the efficiency for municipal obligations in areas of emergency housing and heating support. Additionally, the program could aid the incredible volunteer organizations that municipal officials often work with to deliver on the ground individualized assistance for residents in need through private philanthropy that no government programs currently address.

However, communities have been inundated with development proposals in shoreland zones for buildings with known hazards but grandfathered conditions that allow expansion under certain limits in locations that could no longer be developed. At the same time, municipal officials see residents on fixed incomes and limited capacity to assume loans in dire need of assistance with improving functional elements of a home to realize energy efficiency. Some low-income heating programs meant to aid low-income residents in aging homes cannot be used because the scope of the work needed for real efficiency is above a significantly low cost threshold for today's construction market. Officials are deeply concerned that grant funding will only be accessed by those with existing capacity or those who have made conscious decisions to remain in harm's way with the capacity to make other choices.

Officials believe that a means test is critical to directing funds where they are most needed and can have the greatest impact to mitigating future risk. Additionally, while we appreciate that grant funding may mirror existing programs, under the Efficiency Maine model, it might be beneficial to understand how those programs have been difficult to access for their intended purpose statewide or have created unintended consequences with restrictive requirements. Additionally, the model does not make it easy for low-income individuals to access and as a result, they are generally utilized only by those with capacity to pay for the projects in advance, meaning they are not effectively delivering for those without resources.

There are other considerations that should also be improved for the model. For instance, communities in Washington County have tried to access funds for electric car charging infrastructure but have not been able to because of a lack of geographically available certified installers or a clear path to getting a locally available installer on the certified list. If the Home Resiliency Grant program mirrors this approach, there should be designated construction or installation project specialists available in all areas of the state or a clear path for a local professional to be able to get on to the list. Heat pump installation incentives have required the disconnection of other primary heating sources that could be used as backup particularly during significant cold weather events. As a result, there has been a significant uptick in the claims of water damage from frozen pipes during recent cold spells that would have been avoided with supplemental heating sources when the heat pumps are less efficient. Overly prescriptive requirements that do not allow for redundant heating sources may place individuals with little capacity in preventable and expensive situations because of the same weather they need protection against.

Officials believe proposed amendments are moving in the right direction but really encourage the committee to make sure the program adopts a workable—poverty focused— approach that makes the grants low barrier and target to true need. The Association and its members appreciate the collaborative funding approach and support that will help municipalities leverage other federal programs that would be unattainable without a state partnership. The Association and its members also thank you for your thoughtful consideration on how such programs may be constructed to help municipalities support their most vulnerable residents.