

March 6, 2025

RE: Support of LD 629

Dear Senator Chip Curry, Senate Chair and Representative Traci Gere, House Chair of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development and Sponsor of LD 629, Representative Tiffany Roberts:

My name is Eric (EJ) Roach, and I am the Director of Economic & Community Development for the City of Old Town. I also live in Old Town, along with 7,500 other folks. These 7,500 residents may not be aware of the Maine Development Foundation, the Maine Downtown Center, or even the Institute for Civic Leadership. However, these programs and resources offered by MDF have directly impacted the community where they live and work. Located on the banks of the Penobscot river, Old Town has held a close relationship with its surrounding waters, and has a rich history of log drives, water powered sawmills, canoe building, and pulp and paper manufacturing. If you live in a community with a pulp & paper mill you deal with uncertainty. When I spoke to this committee last year, the paper mill in Old Town was idle. As I submit this testimony, it remains idle. Our current uncertainty, coupled with decades of uncertainty makes supporting MDF and our ongoing relationship even more important.

I am asking for your support of LD 629 so MDF can continue to provide its high-quality programs and services such as the Maine Downtown Center and the Institute for Civic Leadership.

Maine Downtown Center

The City of Old Town has directly benefited from the Maine Downtown Center and their guidance helping us focus on our downtown redevelopment. The following are key items that outline our engagement and support from MDF/MDC as it relates to our Downtown.

- MDF's Maine Downtown Center staff visited Old Town initially as part of the FOR ME program to meet with municipal staff and elected officials to discuss what a formal downtown revitalization program looked like and to put eyes on our downtown and see it first-hand.
- We received a small mini grant to complete a downtown project so the community would start thinking more about downtown and how small incremental steps can make an impact.
- We received consulting services for a community engagement process called the Downtown Revitalization Roadmap process which gave the community a path forward and outlined priorities for our downtown revitalization efforts.
- The Maine Downtown Center Staff spent a great deal of time working with City staff and a local volunteer committee on developing a downtown focused organization.
- When the FOR Maine effort concluded, the Maine Downtown Center continued to support Old Town by regularly attending meetings and assisting with the launch of our organization. They provided best practices from other communities around Maine and nationally so that we did not have to reinvent the wheel.

- Downtown Old Town, with the help of the Maine Downtown Center, became an official MDC Affiliate Community February 1, 2024.

- Downtown Old Town, one year later was selected to host the Maine Downtown Center Affiliate Jamboree, scheduled for Friday March 7, 2025.

Old Town has been talking about developing our downtown for decades. We had the passion and vision, but we were missing something. What we were missing was a framework to focus our initiatives and a friend to help show us the way. We needed a framework that focuses on Economic Vitality, Design, Organization, and Promotion. The Main Downtown Center has brought this Maine Street America approach to Old Town and has been that “friend” to help us get there.

Institute for Civic Learning

I am a graduate of the Institute for Civic Leadership (Elephant Class) of MDF. I eagerly became a participant after two staff members, our Assistant City Manager and our Finance Director participated. As our assistant City Manager often says, “ICL is the best thing since sliced bread”! Our Library Director is a current ICL participant, and we are in the process of recruiting participants for this year’s class. You may recognize a pattern of our support and engagement with MDF and their leadership programs.

The ICL experience was transformative to say the least. I learned how to not only be a better leader for Old Town, but it made me a better person. The connections I made with other leaders at ICL have continued beyond ICL. Over a year has passed since the program concluded and we continue to support each other and collaborate on projects and initiatives across the entire State of Maine.

Although I am one of a few Old Town leaders to experience ICL, my 7,500 neighbors in Old Town have indirectly benefited from our involvement in the program.

I would kindly remind you when the legislature created MDF over 40 years ago the legislature gave MDF funding for the work MDF was doing for the State of Maine. Somewhere along the way that funding disappeared. I strongly encourage you to restore the \$500,000 in funding that was the intent of the legislature when MDF was originally started. This \$500,000 is adjusted for inflation from the original amount in 1978.

MDC’s impact is great. They serve as a statewide resource for downtown revitalization. Their successful engagement has led to an increased demand for their services. They fill a gap in knowledge and services that no one else is doing in the State of Maine. Their individualized approach takes more time but has great impact and satisfaction and success at the local level. The return on investment continues to be that for every \$1 invested in one of Maine’s 11 Main Streets, there is a \$23 return on that investment.

I thank you for your support of LD 629.

Eric “E.J.” Roach

City of Old Town