

Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Housing & Economic Development

In Support of L.D. 1516: An Act to Strengthen the Maine Development Foundation

May 2, 2025

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Honorable Members,

The Maine Development Foundation (MDF) offers testimony, via our CEO Yellow Light Breen of Holden, Maine, in support of the proposed legislation to extend MDF Board of Director term limits from 5 years to a maximum of 8 years of service, and to permit (but not require) state agencies to more closely collaborate with MDF on projects and services where a sole source exceptions is appropriate.

MDF is a statewide non-profit, non-partisan membership organization uniquely established by the Legislature and the Governor in 1977 to work across the business, government, nonprofit, and education sectors on long-range strategies for growing Maine's economy. We do this through our trusted economic research, leadership programs, and several signature public-private partnerships. This Committee is hopefully now familiar with some of our valuable programming: the nonpartisan *Measures of Growth* annual scorecard; our leadership development programs including the "legislative bus tours;" and our cross-sector partnerships such as the Maine Downtown Center, Forest Opportunity Roadmap (FOR/Maine), and SEAMaine.

Our Board of Directors has been eager to extend term limits to match more closely what is typical on other boards and commissions. I have attached behind my testimony the commentary from our current and past three board chairs so you can take it directly from them! It is gratifying to have Board members begging to stay on longer, both because of commitment to the mission but more importantly because they feel like they are just hitting their stride in contributing strategically and deeply due to the learning curve of MDF's broad and complex array of programming. Term limits refresh the perspectives of a board – but the limits should be long enough that the Board can sink its teeth into the work and for good Board leadership development in cultivating future Board officers and enabling former chairs to stick around a bit as guides.

Second, the bill makes it even easier for other state agencies to collaborate and work with MDF by amending state procurement statutes to more expressly allow (but NOT require) the executive branch to sole source projects to MDF where appropriate. The proposed provision is modelled exactly on the current language that permits state agencies to collaborate directly with the UMaine System on a sole source basis. MDF's statute already clearly intends that other agencies collaborate with MDF on initiatives to grow Maine's economy, this would give a little more edge to that.

This provision was inspired by supportive legislators who noted that whether or not the Legislature expands the direct General Fund support for MDF, you could strengthen and sustain this entity you created by leveraging us to work on other appropriate, funded projects rather than re-invent the wheel.

I know "sole source" can be a controversial issue for reasons having nothing to do with MDF. If this particular approach can't get a strong committee consensus, we would recommend dropping it from the final bill. We appreciate the Committee's creativity in seeking ways to ensure sustainability and maximum impact from the capabilities of a vigorous MDF, reducing our dependence on uncertain grants. Other ideas might include adding a "sunrise" provision in economic development statutes that ensures that new projects and entities are not created as standalones if best done by existing entities like MDF and FAME. And, without statutory action you can encourage other agencies and entities to partner with MDF for maximum impact.

Respectfully submitted, Yellow Light Breen, President & CEO (yellow@mdf.org; 207.478.3633)