

May 7, 2025

RE: Testimony IN SUPPORT of LD 1940, An Act to Revise the Growth Management Law

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development;

Please accept this testimony IN SUPPORT of LD 1940, An Act to Revise the Growth Management Law.

My name is Vanessa L. Farr, and I am practicing planner with 30 years of professional experience. I'm a member of American Planning Association and Maine Association of Planners; an accredited member of the Congress for the New Urbanism; former member of the Ontario Professional Planners Institute; and Canadian Institute of Planners. I hold a planning degree from the University of Waterloo, Canada. I've served as a Planning Director in small towns (less than 8,000 people) in both Maine and Massachusetts. I left full time civil service in 2015 to start Maine Design Workshop and am now the Regional Manager of Planning and Design for Haley Ward, a 300 person multi-disciplinary engineering firm headquartered in Bangor, Maine.

I am a MAP member and I will not be speaking in support of LD 1751. I am here to testify in support of LD 1940, a bill I've been involved in for 4 years now, along with a multi-disciplinary group of professionals, municipal staff, elected officials, and others from across the State.

I'd like to take an opportunity to express gratitude to colleagues who have worked tirelessly to listen, contribute, meet, consider, debate, and revise language to reflect points of consensus for aspects of this bill. I offer my sincere thank you to Representative Melanie Sachs for carrying this effort forward, and giving us the courage to stand up for community, and speak truth from the heart. Thank you Members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee for your service, and for your consideration of my testimony.

Despite real concerns about professional retaliation – because it is happening – I’m submitting this testimony to provide a voice for all of Maine’s people and places, now and future.

I have written or been involved with countless comprehensive plans and land use policy amendments over my career, but I’d like to tell you about a few challenging situations that highlight why we’re here today.

Three times now I’ve been hired to do ”clean up”.

In January I was hired by the Town of Brunswick to effectively “start over” and guide a tired-but-still dedicated committee and new staff to the end of a 5 year planning process – in six, fast-paced months.

5 years.

Before Brunswick. When I arrived in Maine in 2009, I took up the position of Planning Director for the Town of Yarmouth and inherited another 5 year stalled out process. I was hired to bring the process to a close, but as I worked my way through draft language and voiced concerns about the quality of recommendations to the Town Manager, he told me to “stop reading”, edit only what was needed to reinforce the more important work to come – rezoning (more on that at the end).

In between these years, while serving at the Greater Portland Region, I was asked by a handful of communities to piece in parts that volunteer committees couldn’t take on, or fix strategies or find deficiencies in mapping to help achieve certification. Janice Avignon, Long Island resident and Comprehensive Plan chair, spoke to you last year about how preparing the data chapters consumed their limited resources such that after two years and thousands of volunteer hours, they felt like they missed out on answering the most fundamental question: how would they sustain their island population and life into the future? They could see the decline in population and the affect that high costs of fuel and real estate was having, preventing young families from supporting and replenishing their aging population. *They needed face to face conversations, not pie charts and bar graphs.*

Turning back to Brunswick: 5 years, multiple planning directors, and two dismissed consultants. The most fundamental thing to know is that the guidance the committee had received up until we were hired was to focus on the data chapters.

In 5 years the committee hadn't had one deep and productive workshop using maps or the Beginning With Habitat data sets to identify what to protect, where development goes, and what intensity that development should take. There'd been no drafting of policies and strategies as to how they'll achieve a balance of protection and growth into the future.

How did we recover the process?

We set the data chapters aside. We re-focused the committee on mapping (as its described in LD 1940) and understanding environmental constraints and human settlements or Place Types. In a "Place Types 101" 30-minute tutorial, we covered the characteristics and metrics for each of the Place Types referenced in this bill, showing Google earth imagery of real examples. The committee used an online interactive map to identify where each of the Place Types could be found in their community and where new ones could be made in time, or existing placetypes could transform to be another kind of place.

We asked the committee to identify what the level of protection, enhancement or transformation each place type in Brunswick deserved.

For example, Cooks Corner, characteristic of a suburban retail center, was identified for transformation to a Downtown Center. Brunswick's Maine Street, a Downtown Center, was identified for enhancement only.

Based on that feedback, we prepared plans and 3D drawings to illustrate the desired level of change. With the support of the drawings, the committee was able to reach consensus and set specific policies and strategies to achieve the vision of "One Brunswick, Beautifully Balanced".

This work was not complicated, highly intuitive, and has informed a set of custom strategies created by the committee, with only gentle guidance by qualified planning experts. The strategies are not cut and paste from

requirements needed to meet certification. They're made of *Brunswick, and for Brunswick.*

If I'd had the privilege to start Brunswick at the beginning, we would have first listened to the community to gather concerns, issues, big ideas, dreams — and second, developed a series of custom inquiries and analyses to respond to the community.

This is how trust is made and why a people-focused, data-informed process leads to change.

In Yarmouth, plan revisions lead the Town to develop and adopt a form based code covering the Rt 1 area (2012) and the Village (2015). *All good development that Yarmouth has seen between 2012 -2022 has come from that 11th hour comprehensive plan fix and subsequent re-zoning.*

In Casco, all its policies and strategies were created *by the people* during the “Casco Planning Days” charrette. Data was used, as needed. It did not dominate the committee or the community conversation. When a focus group about environmental stewardship raised questions about habitat loss and fragmentation, we developed a geospatial “experiment” to understand and explain the long term vulnerabilities of large lot zoning. Data informed discussion.

As a result, people trusted the plan – and they're using it. In year one post-adoption, the plan has lead the town to:

- Secure a Resiliency grant
- Allocate funding for a full time planner (no qualified candidates applied)
- Adopt a Vision Zero plan
- Adopt a Complete Streets policy
- Establish a Safe Streets Committee
- Establish a Water Quality Commission
- Secure a grant to develop an Open Space plan
- Secure regional transportation money for five quick build projects
- Inspire 4 private businesses including Hancock Lumber to take steps to re-invest and expand in Casco,

- Host a Bicycle Rodeo and Safety Day at an elementary school
- Draft rural zoning tools (farm compounds) to prevent sprawl while incentivizing affordable housing development within rural areas.

As for a shift to a tiered system of mandates proposed by LD 1751, it's more of the same one-sized-fits-all approach that has led us to take action to change the GMA. Where will a town like Brunswick fit in? It's neither quite in the Greater Portland region nor quite Midcoast. Brunswick is relatively small in population, yet serves a larger regional population. With high quality schools and every major urban area plus some of the state's largest employers within an hour of Brunswick, one could argue it deserves significant resources and regional collaboration to make sure continued growth is fiscally sustainable for the still small town that Brunswick actually is.

The truth is, you'd need to make a complicated matrix of conditions and factors to avoid more of the top-down, one-sized approach that comes with a tiered system will be. There is no room for complicated when plans are being written by volunteer boards.

LD 1751 fails to provide any clarity or put any guardrails on limiting state mandates, leaving this MAP member with no confidence that we'll come out of rulemaking with the flexibility that Maine communities need. We can think good thoughts that funding incentives will help towns plan, but we know from the GMA's history that it is ill-advised for municipalities to depend on external funding sources.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony. I remain at the ready to participate in innovative and productive dialogue with the Housing and Economic Development Committee, and ultimately, in rulemaking for this bill.

Respectfully submitted,

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