

James Fisher
Deer Isle
LD 1751

Jim Fisher, PhD, MRP, AICP
Deer Isle Town Manager
May 8, 2025

Hearing for LD 1751 “An Act to Improve the Growth Management Program Laws”
Date of Hearing: Thursday, May 8 2025

Recommendation: Ought to Pass

To the Honorable Senator Curry, Honorable Representative Gere, and Distinguished Members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee:

I am Jim Fisher, Deer Isle Town Manager for over seven years. We are a proud downeast island community, along with Stonington, producing valuable traditional products like lobsters and clams, but also the home to a burgeoning creative economy with Haystack School of Arts and Crafts, the Deer Isle Artists Association, and perhaps most importantly Nervous Nellie’s Jams and Jellies.

I attended Bowdoin College in the 1970s, spent more than 45 years learning, practicing and teaching fields related to planning in the US, South America, Asia and Africa. I have worked in Maine for the last 27 years assisting towns with land use, environment, public health, economic development and transportation, as well as teaching and conducting research at Bates College, UMA and EMCC. I have served for decades on the Maine Association of Planners Board of Directors and the Hancock County Planning Commission. My bottom line has been rural and regional planning in Maine to help to guide and enable towns to a healthy, prosperous and sustainable future.

Maines 430 small towns and rural hamlets face many challenges, including changing population, economy, environment and technology. Towns that fail to plan for the future are at greater risk of unorganized sprawl, loss of their natural environment, inefficient infrastructure and threats to health and safety. The Growth Management Act was created to encourage community coordination of development for greater efficiency, equity and sustainability. The track record for planning in Maine has been very positive. Places that plan are more successful. Regions that collaborate are even more successful. I helped small towns to work together to create nationally recognized corridors like the Acadia All American Road, the Schoodic National Scenic Byway, the East Coast Greenway and the Downeast Sunrise Trail, landmarks to regional collaboration.

LD 1751 defends and improves the Growth Management Act in several important ways. I recognize that my rural, downeast region of Maine has been on a remarkable sprint to enact comprehensive plans. I have assisted Brooklin, Brooksville, Orland, Penobscot, Deer Isle and others to complete plans in just the last five years.

The current Growth Management Act works, but all programs require updates to recognize changing conditions. Our populations are aging. Our economy is confronting new challenges such as the high cost of housing and shortages of key labor force skills. Our environment is shifting, threatening traditional occupations in farming, fishing and forestry. Technology is changing the value of location, connecting rural outposts with high speed internet, allowing for remote workers but also contributing to our loss of rural health services.

LD 1751 was written by people like me, the boots on the ground working with municipal governments. For this reason it has been endorsed by the Maine Association of Planners and the Maine Municipal Association. In my 25+ years as a planner in Maine I have seen the difficulties small towns face with change, but also the sometimes burdensome requirements of planning that sap the willpower of even the most ardent community volunteers. Towns with significant resources can hire consulting firms charging six figures for comprehensive plans. Our small towns must

draw from volunteers and very modest funding. In Deer Isle I coordinated 75 volunteers, completing our 258 page plan in just one year, but it wasn't easy.

Small towns, particularly our very small towns, need greater flexibility, fewer mandates and more incentives to engage in planning. Small towns will benefit from some of the added flexibility of LD 1751. Our smallest towns don't have centers and may not need to define growth areas. They can still engage in planning using performance standards rather than zoning.

Our rural towns will also benefit by added incentives to work together in regional planning. Deer Isle and Stonington are joined at the hip and are working more closely than ever to implement our comprehensive plans to create more housing, improve coastal resilience, improve energy reliability, expand high speed internet access and upgrade our transportation corridors. We need to work together, so it is imperative that the Growth Management Act support this level of collaboration.

Thank you for your consideration. Like any good Town Manager, I am always available to answer your questions and hear your concerns.