

TESTIMONY TO THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
WRITTEN TESTIMONY PROVIDED
ought to pass

LD 1751 "An Act to Improve the Growth Management Program Laws"
DATE OF HEARING: Thursday, May 8, 2025

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

My name is Ben Smith, owner and Principal Planner at North Star Planning. I started NSP seven years ago, after planning for more than eleven years in the Town of Windham. We currently have a staff of five professional planners, and provide long-range planning, ordinance and policy development services, and planning board support services to communities around Maine. Since 2017, I personally have been involved with the comprehensive planning process for about fifteen Comprehensive Plans for Maine communities.

Going back a number of years, I have had conversations with many professional planners to strategize on how to update the current Growth Management statute to make it more effective for all Maine communities. These conversations have ranged from formal discussions at conferences and online surveys, to friendly impromptu discussions after committee meetings, lunches, and even at local sporting events. There seems to be good consensus around three overarching principles:

- Shift the balance of effort from a focus on inventory and existing conditions to a focus on the future, along with the actions required to make progress on important local goals,
- Simplify plan requirements so that planning is not such a daunting task for smaller communities that lack access to resources and staff, and
- Encourage more regional land use and resource planning, with regional data collection establishing the foundation for local plans.

LD 1751 was prepared by professional planners who know that improvements to the current planning process are necessary and achievable. I believe that LD 1751 will:

- Reduce the focus on looking back – as represented by what is often the hundreds of pages of research and the hundreds of hours it takes to assemble – while retaining a holistic view of information required to establish what individual communities need to be planning for,

- Avoid overcomplication of the Future Land Use mapping process by which communities make decisions about where to make investments, where to focus change, and where to insulate from the impacts of change, and
- Use the rulemaking process to encourage regional planning efforts and to establish a tiered system of planning so that even our smallest communities still have meaningful opportunities to carry out comprehensive planning processes.

There was a shift in the comprehensive planning model in Maine about 20 years ago, relative to the state process for certifying comprehensive plans. Many communities felt that planners at the state level were grading local plans harshly against a strict set of state level requirements, frustrating many communities from achieving certification of local plans after sometimes years of work. As a result, there was a transition at the state level where planners began playing a facilitating role at the end of a local planning process, providing guidance and advice based on state goals. That was a positive change that reduced barriers to local planning.

Today, the state has the opportunity to further reduce barriers to local planning by making it easier and more meaningful for people in communities of all sizes to engage in the important work of thinking about – and taking action for – the future of their places.

Sincerely,

Ben Smith, AICP
Principal Planner
North Star Planning