



To: Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development

From: Aroostook Partnership

Re: Support for LD 2164 – Vacant School Housing Conversion Program

Date: 05 February 2026

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kiersten S. Purington and I am the President & CEO of the Aroostook Partnership in Caribou, ME. The Aroostook Partnership is a unique private/public consortium of over 65 businesses, the Northern Maine Development Commission, County higher education institutions, and several regional non-profit organizations. Our mission is to ensure the economic strength, growth, and resiliency of Aroostook County.

On behalf of the Aroostook Partnership, I am writing in strong support of **LD 2164, An Act to Assist Communities with Converting Vacant School Buildings into Housing.**

As an organization that works closely with municipalities across Aroostook County, we regularly see the challenges communities face when school buildings are closed and transferred to municipal ownership. Former schools are often centrally located, structurally durable, and valued community assets. Yet they also present significant hurdles, including high upfront costs, environmental concerns, regulatory complexity, and limited local capacity to evaluate and advance reuse.

Additionally, the housing crisis remains a very real challenge in Aroostook County. With limited availability of housing stock, aging infrastructure, and skyrocketing costs, Aroostook County residents struggle to find affordable and accessible housing across all income levels. Reuse and refurbishment of existing structures, including the conversion of vacant school buildings, remains a viable solution to addressing this crisis in northern Maine and other rural parts of the state.

LD 2164 responds directly to both of these realities and establishes a practical, voluntary framework that enables municipalities to partner with Maine Redevelopment to access technical assistance, coordinated project support, and targeted funding to evaluate and advance housing reuse. The dedicated funding included in this bill is essential to making reuse feasible. Without upfront resources for feasibility analysis, environmental assessment, and site preparation, many former school buildings remain vacant for years. This leads to continued deterioration, increased municipal carrying costs, and lost opportunities to address local housing needs.

The funding proposed in **LD 2164** is targeted at removing these barriers so properties can be positioned for redevelopment rather than becoming long-term liabilities. Removing these early phase capital expenditures to determine a site's potential for reuse empowers municipalities to market their properties more effectively and de-risk future private investments. Maine is facing a well-documented housing shortage that affects communities of all sizes. Meeting the State's goal of creating **80,000 new housing units** will require a mixture of new construction and the reuse of existing public assets. Former school buildings represent one of the most practical and near-term opportunities to contribute to housing supply while reducing long-term municipal burden.

For smaller and rural communities in particular, like Aroostook County, limited staff capacity and the complexity of environmental, financial, and regulatory requirements can stall projects indefinitely. **LD 2164** fills a critical gap by pairing coordinated expertise through a trusted statewide partner with capital support, without shifting new mandates or responsibilities onto municipalities.

We believe this approach will meaningfully support communities across Maine and especially in Aroostook County where there are already available vacant schools that are poised for redevelopment into desperately needed housing. The approach also aligns state investment with municipal capacity. For these reasons, the Aroostook Partnership urges the Legislature to support **LD 2164** and we thank the sponsor and committee for advancing a thoughtful, community-driven solution to vacant public buildings and Maine's housing shortage.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

Sincerely,



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