



**Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic
Development
Lee Umphrey, President & CEO, Eastern Maine Development Corporation
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Thank you, Chair Curry, Chair Gere, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC) we strongly support **LD 2164, *An Act to Assist Communities with Converting Vacant School Buildings into Housing***.

EMDC is a community-based, nonprofit organization that fosters public-private relationships and provides programmatic services while leveraging resources that help businesses, communities, and individuals reach long-term goals and prosperity. We are the only economic development organization in the state that provides small business lending, economic planning and development, and workforce development services in our region and statewide.

For years, we have provided planning services to municipalities across Maine, assisting them in developing strategic long-term plans and policies for their communities. We have seen firsthand the challenges these communities face and believe that LD 2164 will help to address them. The central issue facing many of these communities is an aging population; fewer children and more adults mean there is often not enough demand to maintain a school, but too much demand for their existing housing stock. While these neglected buildings are often in dire need of rehabilitation, lower-income Mainers are being forced away from these communities by rising housing costs, and businesses are forced to cut their hours due to an inability to find employees who live near them.

This is an opportunity to help solve one problem by addressing another, benefiting all people of Maine. Municipalities face many barriers to both building affordable housing and converting former school properties: complex homebuilding and environmental regulations, a high upfront cost of updating and converting an old building, and a lack of local administrative capacity to advance such an undertaking. LD 2164 will establish a voluntary framework for municipalities to work with Maine Redevelopment Authority to overcome these barriers to better utilize this public property for the public good.

This type of conversion has a successful history in Maine. Right down the road from our main office, the old Bangor High School has long been converted into affordable apartments, with recent renovations adding new units and new amenities. In Veazie, the property the Graham School was originally built on has been converted into affordable housing for seniors. More recently, Lewiston started to build senior housing of its own at the site of its Martel School, and the former McLain School in Rockland is beginning a transformation into affordable housing for all ages. There are other such

projects currently under consideration—or have been delayed due to the cost or complexity of this process.

The framework created by LD 2164 will better enable this conversion and make this sort of project viable for additional former schools. This legislation further enhances the purpose of the Maine Redevelopment Land Bank to assist municipalities and other entities in redeveloping eligible properties.

We believe that this bill represents an opportunity to breathe new life into buildings that would otherwise be long-term liabilities for towns, while also meaningfully advancing the state's goal of unlocking new housing supply to fight the housing shortage and make living in Maine more affordable for the average person. For this reason, EMDC 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 your consideration.