

November 13, 2023

Honorable Senator Piece, Honorable Representative Gere, Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you to the Joint Select Committee on Housing for offering this opportunity to submit testimony on LD1976 (An Act to Update the Growth Management Program Laws.)

Please accept this testimony as support for LD 1976. As background, I've been a practicing planner for 26 years, working as a municipal planner from 1998 to 2016 and with municipalities my entire career. Prior to launching a small, woman-owned planning firm called Maine Design Workshop (2016 - present), I was the Director of Planning for the Town of Yarmouth (2009 - 2015). I've also served as a Senior Planner and policy expert for the Greater Portland Council of Governments, and for the past two years as Planning Director for Principle Group, a planning, design, and development firm.

I work with municipalities of all sizes across Maine to write plans and amend zoning codes, and with developers and municipalities who are collaborating to address housing needs. I serve on my local housing committee in Freeport, too. It is my work with small rural towns that led me to volunteer to collaborate with other experienced practitioners to co-author this proposed amendment to GMA.

Rather than continuing to complain about how GMA was not serving the municipalities, I felt like it was time to *DO*: that the issues we're confronting are not able to have the attention or the support that they deserve because too much time and resources are being spent collecting data that more often than not doesn't change a plan's recommended policies and strategies. For the last decade and a half we've been testing out place-based community planning with towns who placed their local needs and concerns, wants and wishes for their Comprehensive Plans first.

State compliant plans were still made despite the shift in focus to a more inquiry-based, data-informed process (rather than data-driven), but so were ambitious, zoning-code-ready vision plans developed through consensus-building.

I am writing in support of LD 1976 because I believe the proposed changes tackle some of the core challenges with the program: poor basic direction in the statute about how to map land and plan for settlements that have been here for decades, and really direct growth in a way that achieves multiple local and State-wide goals:

- Pick up any plan created in the past 30 years and it will say, "Protect our rural character." But GMA provides no framework to identify what rural means, or that it means multiple things to multiple people.

- Pick up any plan created in the past 20 years and it will say, “Create walkable, mixed use communities.” Again, GMA provides no framework to identify what that is.
- Pick up most plans created today and you hold a document written by volunteers who spend hundreds of hours and a lot of emotion, undocumented and unaccounted for, just on the data and mapping requirements alone. From my experience supervising staff in my current and former roles, it takes an estimated 1,000 hours for a trained planner to fulfill the data analysis requirements, even for a small town. The requirements don’t flex based on complexity of conditions, geography or size of place.

And the requirements are not timeless, but instead represent a static capture of the issues and concerns at a moment in time.

Contrary to the testimony some of my peers are offering, this proposal does not swap one set of mandates for another, which is a recurring misconception. This bill *removes* mandates, with exception to mapping environmental systems and existing built places - *but GMA already mandates we do this*, it’s just called something different. The cumulative impact is a reduction in mandates. As with the current system, a well-resourced municipality can always elect to do more.

I’d like to point out that before SPO was disbanded, evaluations and reports prepared by respected planners identified that GMA needed work. Then in the 2010’s an administration change solidified the fact that still no changes to GMA would be made - remaining staff would not open rule-making and call attention to the law. As 2020 approached, still no movement occurred to change GMA - by state staff or within my peer group (I point out that I am a member of the Maine Association of Planners, and to my knowledge there has been no survey to solicit my opinion as a member. I do not support their testimony against this bill.)

I wholeheartedly appreciate the opportunity I’ve had to work in a bottom-up, open and transparent process with many smart and talented practitioners to develop this bill. I trust that the process will continue here at this Committee. I have deep gratitude for all who are contributing *by doing*. Last, I remain available and interested to serve when it is time for rulemaking and development of technical assistance.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony. I am glad to answer any questions you may have about my experiences working with Maine’s small towns.

Kindly,

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