

November 14, 2023

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing:

I am writing in support of LD 1976, "An Act to Update the Growth Management Program Laws." I served on the ad hoc committee that developed many of the recommended changes in LD 1976.

As a Gray resident for 35 years I've been involved in many efforts to shape the way in which the town grows, particularly in our village area. This has included serving on Gray's first ever Comprehensive Plan Committee (1990), on several town committees, and on the Town Council from 2019-2022, and since June 2023. As my experience spans decades and includes some activities that were not Council-driven, I chose not to speak on behalf of the current Council in my testimony.

Gray's experience with comprehensive planning has not been entirely positive. Our first plan received State approval but was largely ignored by subsequent Councils. Our 2003 plan (with which I was not involved) failed to identify growth areas and as a result never received State approval. Like the first one, it did little to proactively shape development patterns. Comprehensive planning was widely viewed as an expensive state mandate that had little relevance to our community. Voters continued to elect Council members who were hostile to using public investment to revitalize our village center and preferred a laissez-faire, strip-style commercial development pattern, counter to our first two plans.

However, in November 2020 our third Comprehensive Plan (in which I was also not involved) was approved by over 75% of the voters. We refer to it frequently and encourage town staff and committees to be guided by it.

Why did voters show such strong support for the 2020 Comp Plan? Among the reasons are:

- 1) Clear and increasing residential development pressures driven by soaring real estate prices in Portland and its inner-ring suburbs.
- 2) Residents' awareness that private land they'd once relied on for recreation was being lost to residential development.
- 3) Diminishing quality of life due to higher traffic volumes and speeds. Gray is bisected by the Maine Turnpike and laced with state arterials. Towns to the north and west of Gray were also growing rapidly. MDOT's solution was to widen the roads to move more vehicles through move quickly.
- 4) Growing demand for walkable, bikeable roads and a village center that worked for people, not just cars.

It's clear to me that Comprehensive Plans as currently construed aren't sufficient. I believe towns need smaller plans that address residents' concerns and included concrete recommendations that are easier to implement. Plans need to result in relatively rapid and meaningful improvements, not sit on a shelf, for people to believe in plans and the planning process. In 2012 I formed, with a handful of other residents, a citizen-led Bike-Ped Committee that was not part of the Town Council committee structure. With help from the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) we wrote the town's first Bike-Ped Plan, which the Council adopted in 2014 (along with an updated plan in 2018).

The Bike-Ped Plan called for the creation of a village area loop trail (VALT) to help residents move around our unsafe village off-road as much as possible. It also called for new crosswalks, and for

replacing deteriorated Village sidewalks and building new ones. In 2014, based on the approved Bike-Ped Plan, I helped the Town secure a \$31,088 grant from the State's Recreational Trails Program to construct the first segment of the VALT, and the Bike-Ped Committee advocated successfully for funding for new sidewalks and crosswalks in Gray Village. This was followed by construction of a second VALT segment in 2017, and with CDBG funding a third segment opened earlier this month. Residents are happily using the VALT, and realtors routinely list homes in the village as adjacent to it. Score one for planning!

But the Village is only a small part of Gray. The Bike-Ped Plan also called for a new Complete Streets Policy, which GPCOG helped us draft. The Town Council approved this in the spring of 2020. This policy is foundational to work on future roads and intersections in Gray. Not a plan, but a necessary tool!

To address concerns about loss of open space, in 2019 the Council established Gray's first-ever Open Space Committee (OSC). Through the COVID-19 pandemic, with no funding, the OSC researched and wrote the town's first-ever Open Space Plan. The OSC's mantra is to "protect and connect" open space in Gray for the benefit of residents and wildlife. The Council approved this plan in 2022 and has been adding funding to town budgets for future land conservation. The OSC consults with local land trusts and with subdivision developers on land conservation. We're working to repair damaged relationships with landowners, and putting the analysis tools in place to support land acquisition. The OSC is also weighing in on changes to the town's open space subdivision ordinance. Progress has been slow, but steady.

In 2021 the Town of Gray embarked on an ambitious Village Transformation Project (VTP), working with the Principle Group and MDOT to redesign two confusing and dangerous intersections in Gray Village, slow vehicular traffic, and install much-needed bike and pedestrian infrastructure.

The Bike-Ped Plan, the Complete Streets Policy, the 2020 Comp Plan, and to a lesser degree the Open Space Plan have been critical to launching the VTP and will be vital to securing the funding we'll need for implementation. It's worth noting, though, that the Bike-Ped Plan and the VALT pre-dated the 2020 Comp Plan and didn't rely at all on the previous one. I believe the early successes of the Bike-Ped Plan and the VALT showed that smaller, focused, "building block" plans can create a vision for meaningful change that is relatively easy to implement, building residents' confidence, belief, and engagement in planning as a useful tool. We can take small bites at the apple; we don't need to swallow it all at once.

Comp Plans are necessary but not sufficient. In my view, they function best in setting a vision for change and growth in the community as a whole. Successfully implementing them will likely require smaller, building block plans in more narrowly-defined areas – as Gray has done in recent years. Building block plans also create confidence that volunteers' work will result in meaningful, observable benefits; not just sit on a shelf.

As a side note, another benefit of the building-block plans is that they help engage and build capacity in residents who have a passion for particular topics. I've been involved with the OSC from the outset, and it's been gratifying to witness the growth in members' knowledge of how to make change happen at the local level. None had been active in town affairs previously.

LD 1976 will help streamline the Comp Plan process for towns, with an emphasis on engaging residents in creating a shared vision for future growth, using mapping and other tools to show what that growth could look like, and preparing for implementation beyond simply updating zoning ordinances. Spending less time and funding on unnecessary Comp Plan requirements will allow towns to direct their limited resources toward taking the smaller steps that can result in meaningful community change.