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**Testimony of Rob Liscord, Maine Equal Justice, *in support of*
LD 1694 “An Act To Create the Maine Redevelopment Land Bank Authority” with
Amendments**

To Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and members of the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business: My name is Rob Liscord, and I am a Policy Advocate focused on housing and homelessness at Maine Equal Justice. We are a civil legal services organization, and we work with and for people with low income seeking solutions to poverty through policy, education, and legal representation. Thank you for the opportunity to offer written testimony in support of LD 1694 with a proposed amendment which we have discussed with Representative Sachs.

Maine Equal Justice Supports LD 1694 Because Maine Must Build More Affordable Housing and Opening up Previously Undevelopable Properties is the First Step.

To state the problem simply: Mainers need safe housing that is affordable, and Maine doesn't have enough options. Over 19,000 Maine families at or below 30% the Area Median Income are extremely rent burdened in their current housing because they lack access to rental assistance. For a family of three, 30% AMI is equal to an annual income of \$18,900. Additionally, this spring, the waitlist for the Section 8 program in Maine topped out at 25,000 households. To address the needs of these Mainers, Maine Equal Justice supports a range of bills this session that would increase revenue to provide direct rental assistance to families and fund supportive services that help families find and keep stable housing.

Even when families do have vouchers, many still struggle to find safe, affordable housing. The Press Herald and Bangor Daily News have documented the struggle Mainers face “leasing up” their voucher with a willing landlord. Tenants face a lack of available units in their area, conditions of the available units that don't meet program standards, and prices of the available units exceeding the program caps, among other barriers. Simply, every community in Maine needs more housing that is safe and accessible to our neighbors with the lowest incomes.

As Maine looks to housing development solutions, it is crucial to acknowledge that our primary tool for developing affordable housing – the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program – produces housing that is still unaffordable to the lowest income Mainers. For a family below 30% AMI to

afford the lower LIHTC rents, they must have a rental assistance voucher. The Urban Institute has shown that in LIHTC projects, 37% of households still spend more than 30% of their income on rent – unless they have a voucher.¹ Given this gap in who is served by the hallmark affordable housing program, we support Maine looking to additional strategies to produce much needed affordable housing. The land bank is one of these strategies that addresses the problem of site control.

Maine Equal Justice supports the creation of the Redevelopment Land Bank Authority and the Development Ready Community Planning Committee because it will help Maine communities redevelop abandoned and unsafe commercial properties into safe, affordable housing and other needed public amenities. Development of housing is costly, and project financing has razor thin margins. Even moderate land acquisition and site preparation costs can be the difference between housing being built and not. Therefore, Maine needs a solution like the Redevelopment Land Bank Authority to mitigate these costs and ease the path forward for new housing.

Suggested Amendments

In discussions with the Representative Sachs and stakeholders who worked together on the bill, we understand that our goal that Maine create safe, affordable housing in every Maine community for Mainers of all income levels is shared by the bill proponents. To better achieve this goal, we suggest the following two amendments to the Development Ready Community Planning Committee:

- a) Add to the Committee representatives from organizations advocating for the right of those experiencing poverty and who promote civil rights and racial equity in their primary mission;
- b) Add language requiring the commission to consider the housing needs at all income levels.

The proposed amendment language is attached to my testimony. This is consistent with the Legislatures commitment to evaluating racial equity in LD 2 and similar to an amendment made to Speaker Fecteau's LD 609 – Resolve, To Establish a Commission to Increase Housing Opportunities in Maine by Studying Zoning and Land Use Restrictions.

As Maine considers the reuse of property acquired through the landbank process, this representation will be crucial to make sure that the interests of historically marginalized groups are considered as the state sets guidelines for thoughtful community development. Both zoning

¹ Corianne Payton Scally, et. al, *The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program: How It Works and Who It Serves*, Urban Institute (July 2018), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/98758/lithc_how_it_works_and_who_it_serves_final_0.pdf

and redevelopment policy over the course of the 20th century have systematically harmed or excluded low income and black and brown families from the benefits they create.

In zoning, White suburban residents have long relied on coded language and racial stereotypes to justify policies promoting single-family homes and denying the development of apartment buildings.² In economic development policy, “blight” has been used to justify wholesale clearance of low income and minority neighborhoods without adequate consideration for the communities being displaced.³ Maine’s redevelopment policies in the 21st Century must keep this history in mind.

Furthermore, at Maine Equal Justice and other legal services providers, it is not uncommon for us to see the lowest income and vulnerable Mainers endure uninhabitable and horrific housing conditions that are left unaddressed by absentee landlords for years. Then, as reinvestment takes places, these same households are pushed out of their communities by rising market values and the corresponding higher rents coming from reinvestment.

As Maine looks to move towards thoughtful and inclusive development in the 21st Century, we think it is critical that representation and consideration be given to these longstanding members of our communities and those who have been historically excluded by development planning. We believe this proposed amendment helps to achieve this goal and is consistent with the goals of the sponsor and proponents.

² See, for example, Jacqueline Rabe Thomas, *Separated by Design: How Some of America’s Richest Towns Fight Affordable Housing*, ProPublica (May 22, 2019), <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-some-of-americas-richesttowns-fight-affordable-housing>, where homeowners in one Connecticut town complained that increasing density to build affordable housing would “ghettoiz[e]” the town and damage “neighborhood character.”

³ For example, in the 1950’s the Vine-Deer-Chatham neighborhood in Portland was raised as a part of urban renewal, displacing over 100 families, *Vine-Deer-Chatham Project: Relocation, A Community Effort*, Portland Public Library Digital Commons (1959), https://digitalcommons.portlandlibrary.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1010&context=citydocs_documents

Attachment 1 – Proposed Amendment Language

**Add Representation to the Development Ready Community Planning Committee
which represent issues impacting low-income Mainers**

§5162. Sub Sec. 1 Amended to Read:

H. A representative from each regional planning organization in the State; ~~and~~

I. Three residents of the State with experience in real estate development appointed by the executive director of the redevelopment authority; and

J. A representative from an organization that advocates for the rights low-income renters and homeowners; and

K. A representative of a local or statewide organization promoting civil rights that has racial justice or racial equity as its primary mission.

§5162. Sub Sec. 2 Amended to Read:

A. Assisting communities in preparing for new investment and development that maximize financial return for state and local economies, improve quality of life for local residents, address housing needs for households of all income levels and advance environmental protection and transportation goals and specific locally identified priority needs;