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Testimony of GrowSmart Maine in support of LD 1246, Resolve, To Study Best Practices and Different Area Needs for Development of Affordable Homes and Expanding Home Ownership in Maine Communities

April 16, 2021

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Nancy Smith, I live in Monmouth, and I am the Executive Director of GrowSmart Maine. We are a statewide non-partisan organization working to create lasting prosperity without sacrificing the quality of life that defines Maine.

We support policies, programs and projects that define and protect the value of Maine's unique built and natural places while supporting long term economic opportunity. Housing is a critical aspect of both quality of life and economic development. As you will see below, this was a major focus of our Summit last year. In addition, we are working within regional efforts to address housing shortages and mismatches between current housing stock and current/future market demand in both southern Kennebec county and southern Aroostook county. Though this Resolve notes the need to quantify regional nuances, this is indeed a statewide imperative.

Our Summit last October, "Flexing the Power of Home Rule: Forging a Path Towards Regional Solutions" encouraged building regional approaches on the strength of home rule tradition. Three key issues were identified: climate change, housing choices, and land use regulation. [Weaving Common Threads](#) details these recommendations.

[Housing Choices](#) was defined as follows: Focus on broadening the diversity of housing types. Explore rent-to-own and less conventional housing acquisition arrangements. Treat housing as a key economic development tool in both new development and adaptive reuse. Acknowledge that property ownership is an equity issue.

Participants identified a variety of challenges and potential solutions that may be relevant to this Resolve:

1. HOME OWNERSHIP:

- Cost of ownership/building is barrier to home ownership.
- Community Land Banks are a tool toward home ownership.
- Consider existing housing stock; is there support for renovating these so they are safer, cleaner, more appropriate for the needs of people today?

- Rent to own options tied to philanthropy. Are there models in Maine? (Millinocket Housing Initiative)
- Section 8 has this option, but not activated in Maine.
- Ownership is core to equity as well; land use decisions begin with land/property ownership.
- Town-owned property; either sell it and devote funds to new housing or adaptive reuse. (Freeport and Cumberland did this.)
- Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) as a tool. GrowSmart offers a [Community Guide](#).

2. ADAPTIVE REUSE:

- Post-COVID-19 reuse of commercial space as housing; big box space as well
- Newly vacated office space could be turned into co-housing – excellent opportunity for downtown housing.
- Look at adaptive reuse of current housing stock. Will zoning allow it?

3. POLICY:

- AARP “Age-Friendly Community” designation has been earned by 70 towns all over Maine. This network could have value in communications and non-geographic regionalism. The designation includes criteria and guidance for items such as transportation and housing. Lori Parham serves on the steering committee of Maine Alliance for Smart Growth, a program of GrowSmart Maine, as one connection. Comment by Anthony Flint, Summit Keynote, ‘what’s good for seniors is good for all.’
- DECD should have a housing policy division coordinating with economic development and an ability to push back on home rule.
- Perhaps housing and land use could merge around smart development zones, adding transportation. Smart development zones (locations that support denser development with reduced red tape) are a great idea, have been discussed before as part of Sustain Southern Maine, and work in other places.
- Disincentivizing sprawl as we grow. Vermont does it well, albeit much smaller state.
- Portland has a proposal to allow overlay for tiny houses.
- Community Land Banks lead to ownership.
- Offer tax incentives for adaptive reuse resulting in affordable housing.

We offer this listing of potential solutions as fodder for the Commission proposed on LD 1246 and offer our services as a resource for the work ahead. There is no designated role for a statewide smart growth organization noted in this Resolve, and we would certainly support that addition.

Best,



Nancy E Smith
Executive Director