

James Lysen
Lewiston

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing: my name is Jim Lysen, I am a resident of Lewiston, a former two-term City Councilor, and I am here today to testify in favor of LD 1656.

This bill will address three important crises that affect us in Maine: the housing shortage crisis, estimated to be as many as 20,000 units; a unique labor crisis that means the state has both too few jobs, and not enough qualified people to fill them, and the climate change crisis. It uses an investment in energy-efficient affordable housing as a creative way to address all three crises together.

As mentioned, Maine is short more than 20,000 housing units, and the housing we do have is a major driver of greenhouse gas emissions. Nearly 20 percent of Maine's carbon dioxide emissions come from housing. Maine also has a shortage of skilled, good-paying jobs in the trades; and, at the same time, not enough skilled tradespeople to build the affordable housing we need.

LD 1656 significantly scales up our ability to build energy efficient housing by expanding our skilled green building workforce through targeted investments that are dedicated to green infrastructure. This bill would result in the responsible construction of energy-efficient affordable housing to help address Maine's housing shortage at the scale that is needed.

The housing will be developed with project labor agreements in place that will raise working standards for construction trades and expand our registered apprenticeship programs, helping to address the labor shortage that drives construction prices up in Maine. The evidence shows that when you hire highly-skilled tradespeople and pay them fairly, projects are far more likely to be completed on time, on budget and with fewer safety issues.

This housing will also meet high energy efficiency standards, which will be a major move toward addressing the climate change crisis. And that, too, has a great impact on Maine's labor force issues -- sustainable building is a major growth industry and this funding will create more good construction jobs in Maine and grow the scale of green building and streamline critical supply chains. Energy efficiency will also save landlords and thus tenants money on their energy bills.

By addressing these three crises together, LD 1656 will have significant economic multiplier effects: Each dollar invested in affordable housing boosts local economies by leveraging public and private resources to generate income—including resident earnings and additional local tax revenue—and supports good-paying job creation and retention. As a former City Councilor, I know first-hand how increased resident earnings and additional local tax revenue are necessary for our communities to thrive.

Another benefit of adding safe, decent and affordable housing is the effect it has on the health of the people in those units. I spent the last dozen years of my professional career as Executive Director of a Federally-Qualified Health Center and witnessed how good housing can help people be more healthy, and make children more ready to learn in school. Finally, adding 20,000 units would greatly reduce the problem of people being unhoused in Maine, which is particularly acute in Lewiston. This includes a high percentage of veterans, who struggle with many issues that stable housing could help resolve.

Thank you for listening to me today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Jim Lysen, Lewiston