



City of Auburn Maine

Mayor Jason J. Levesque

60 Court Street | Auburn, Maine 04210

www.auburnmaine.gov | 207.333.6601

jlevesque@auburnmaine.gov

Written testimony to Labor and Housing Commission

February 14th, 2022

LD 1884: An act to create affordable agriculture homesteads

Good morning,

Good Morning Senator Daughtry, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Labor and Housing Committee. I am Jason Levesque, the Mayor of Auburn Maine, and I would like to testify in support of LD 1884 "An Act to create affordable Agricultural homesteads. I would like to thank Auburn Representative Bickford for submitting this bill along with a bi-partisan group of legislators who recognize that housing discrimination based on your income level and source of your income is fundamentally wrong.

Four years ago, Auburn realized that it was already facing a growing housing affordability issue primarily due to exclusionary zoning dating back to the 1960's designed to stop residential growth.

The most egregious of which was the creation of an agriculture and resource protection zone that covers nearly 40% of our total land mass, not just farms or working forest, but all its undeveloped land, 20,000 acres, or an area that is larger than the entire city of Portland. Which requires large minimum lot size and more strangely that an individual must derive 30% of their income from agriculture before they can build a residence.

For the long-gone crafters of this zoning, mission accomplished. Their goal was to halt all development, to prevent new homes from being built, and most important to devalue their land and shift their tax burden to those living in the urban core where our immigrants and working poor live without hope of growing their families' opportunities through home ownership, or even providing home grown food for themselves, and for potential commercial sales. And what of the Agricultural industry they claimed to protect? Due to the restrictions on their property rights, most of our farmers have shut down, once cleared and productive land returned to forest, and the tax burden has shifted to our city core, and those who can least afford an increase in property taxes. And the heirs to once vibrant farms are left with little opportunities to live on their families land and potentially work it as their parents and grandparents once had.

Just because you label all undeveloped land, regardless of its historic use as Agriculture, does not mean it was ever or will ever be suited for Agriculture. There was only one reason to do this. Stop all growth and lower taxes for those that had homes in the zone predating its 1964 enactment.

This type of socio-economic discrimination has torn our city apart, has exposed some hard truths about past generations intentions and the negative effects it has had on thousands of Auburn residents. I give you this overview as a cautionary tale for the legislature, I'm not asking you to fix Auburn, but to ensure

that municipalities do not copy Auburn's exclusionary zoning in face of sweeping changes you make to address the affordable housing crisis as a clever loophole, one that has proven to stop growth.

You will hear all types of reasons to keep this type of socio-economic discriminating against those who want to build a home and raise their families, but none of them hold water.

If passed this bill will not harm our water supplies, the legislature has already determined the need for stat-wide rules to protect drinking water.

If passed this bill will not hurt farmers, especially when you consider that only one municipality in Maine has an income standard. The state already has strong tax exemption and land protection laws in place. I would also add that the best way to protect our farms is to have more people farm, and the most economical way to do that is to live on the land that they are working. And if faced with some hard economic times, to be able to sell off some of their less productive land to raise capital.

If passed, this will not create a land rush in Auburn or elsewhere, as there are existing ordinances that govern growth and protect working agriculture land.

If passed, this will not cause sprawl, it will prevent it. The population of Auburn's bordering, less restrictive towns has doubled in the last two decades while ours has been unchanged since 1964. The spin off problems caused by this regional sprawl, from increased carbon emission to massive traffic and road repair issues are evident and financially burdensome in many ways.

And while I am a strong advocate of home rule, the legislature has on many occasions acted to create state standards for septic design, building codes, environmental protections, voting rights etc... in order to create fairness and inclusion. This bill when enacted, will prevent the type of discrimination that limits people from having housing choices, prevents labor from living close to the industries that need them, and will help ease the housing crisis within Maine.

Imagine an immigrant family who wants to farm a few acres of land and build their home in a rural peaceful environment, close to services and a market for their goods.

Imagine an end to hearing that 'you aren't welcome in our neighborhood'.

I implore you to support this bill, end socio economic discrimination in the future and close a powerful loophole that would be used to circumvent your authority under a false pretext.

Thank you,

Jason Levesque
Mayor of Auburn Maine