

Written Testimony OPPOSING
LD 2003

(Dr. Eric Jarvi, Hampden, ME)

“Affordable housing” must be a priority, but how we as a state approach that issue must be thoughtfully and fairly addressed without resorting to excessively harsh measures. LD2003 “An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Increase Housing opportunities in Maine by Studying Zoning and Land Use Restrictions”, sponsored by Speaker Ryan Fecteau (D – Biddeford) and co-sponsored by Rep Amy Arata (R – New Gloucester) and Senator Craig Hickman (D – Kennebec). An “Emergency” designation is debatable.

Assisting low-income families gain access to good-quality, stable, affordable housing in high-opportunity neighborhoods must be a goal of municipalities with guidance from the state legislature, not mandates. A January 2021 report from the Brookings Institution, “*Four reasons why more public housing isn’t the solution to affordability concerns*” suggested that purely constructing more public housing is the wrong way to accomplish that objective.

- (1) Local zoning ordinances, while presenting an historical obstacle, can be changed at the local level with appropriate guidance and incentives. Changing local ordinances, however, does not address appropriate land availability, an issue the local planning board would be more familiar with.
- (2) Public agencies aren’t designed to be real estate developers and have little expertise in new construction. Nearly all subsidized housing is built and managed by nonprofit or for-profit developers.
- (3) High-quality subsidized housing needs a long-term commitment.
- (4) Other types of housing subsidy give taxpayers more bang for their buck. Developing subsidized housing is—paradoxically— more expensive than market rate housing, because of the complexity of assembling financing. New construction is also slow: It can take a decade or longer to complete subsidized apartments in tightly regulated markets.

If the goal of policymakers is to help as many low-income households as possible, then a strategy of newly constructed public housing is perhaps the least effective path. Increasing funds for housing vouchers or for the acquisition and rehabilitation of existing apartments would stretch subsidy dollars to cover many more households more quickly, and often in higher-opportunity neighborhoods. Shoring up the long-term physical and financial viability of existing subsidized properties—such as through HUD’s Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program—would also be more cost effective than new construction.

The proposed legislation falls far short of developing a successful solution that reflects the recommendations of the Housing Commission, is not focused on the development of measurable goals, assessment of which level of government is better suited to implement mutually beneficial strategies, and investment in financial and technical resources necessary to deliver statewide goals.