

Committee on State and Local Government
c/o Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

March 3, 2021

RE: LD 446, An Act To Reestablish the State Planning Office

Dear Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony in support of LD 446, An Act To Reestablish the State Planning Office, on behalf of Maine Audubon and our 30,000 members and supporters.

In order to build climate resiliency in Maine's human and natural communities, reduce transportation emissions, prepare for present and anticipated population growth, and preserve Maine's character, our state needs additional land use planning and related technical assistance capacity. Though this may not be achieved precisely in the image of the State Planning Office, eliminated in 2012, Maine Audubon robustly supports establishing or reinvigorating "technical assistance programs to help build sustainable communities," as contemplated by this bill.

Maine's recently adopted Climate Action Plan, informed by a working group comprised of municipal officials and planners, among others, specifically calls for "state leadership for robust technical assistance and funding to communities by 2024 to support local and regional climate resilience initiatives."¹ Several recent studies have assessed the progress of Maine's towns toward climate resilience and have found that technical and financial support for municipal efforts is not uniform across the state.² In fact, only 11% of communities in Maine have a town planner on staff and 72% have no local planner and insufficient or no regional planning support.³

Maine Audubon is pleased that the State is already taking action to address this shortfall. The Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future very recently issued an RFP for a "Community Resilience Pilot Project".⁴ The State is seeking proposals to provide technical assistance and facilitation services that advance community-driven climate resilience planning and implementation. The outcomes of this project will inform the State's long-term plans to support community and regional climate resilience efforts.

Proposed engagement plans by bidders must assess climate hazards such as flooding and community vulnerabilities including public health and infrastructure, as well as an assessment of

¹ [Maine Won't Wait](#), A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action, December 2020 pg. 15.

² See a statewide survey by the Maine Municipal Association ([link](#)), an assessment of adaptation planning in coastal communities ([link](#)), and a sampling of climate mitigation and adaptation efforts in selected communities across Maine ([link](#)).

³ [Maine Won't Wait](#), A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action, December 2020 pg. 85.

⁴ See RFP # 202102011 ([link](#)).

the needs of socially vulnerable populations. Among other “electives”, the plans may also include activities that preserve natural spaces or restore natural functions with benefits for community resilience, carbon sequestration, and ecosystem resilience. It is this aspect of the RFP and land use planning that is of keenest interest to Maine Audubon and where we’d like to see additional state resources and capacity.

Thoughtful planning and “smart growth” principles encourage vibrant town centers and cities, while helping wildlife and natural resources by keeping development out of sensitive habitats and away from important habitat corridors and intact landscapes that wildlife need to breed, feed, and thrive as they move across the state and adapt to a changing climate. Tools exist to help municipalities avoid or minimize impacts to these important areas, but the state doesn’t have the people power to put those tools to work across Maine.

Beginning with Habitat (BwH), based out of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, collects, connects, and consolidates the wealth of species and habitat information that is produced by federal, state, and local agencies. They create comprehensive packages for each Maine municipality that include maps and localized conservation strategies. They empower decision-makers to guide growth in such a way that many years from now, Maine’s quality of place, including fishing, hunting, wildlife watching, and outdoor recreation activity, endures.

In Maine Audubon’s view, the services that BwH provides are under-utilized. More people-power and additional technical capacity, including comprehensive GIS services and technical support for towns to draft and implement comprehensive plans, open space plans, and land use ordinances, is much needed. In addition, there is a real need to coordinate planning in the organized towns with the unorganized townships, and to consider the importance of and better coordinate regional planning across town and township boundaries. These efforts would be greatly enhanced by additional capacity and coordination. Currently, there are only 3.5 people in state government servicing nearly 500 municipalities: 1.5 at BwH and 2 in the Municipal Planning Assistance Team at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. 3.5 people cannot realistically provide the personalized, hands-on, and coordination functions Maine municipalities need.

The need for additional capacity is urgent. This past year, Maine saw housing sales jump nearly 27% from September to November compared with the previous year. The biggest jumps were in Washington (80%), Piscataquis (59%), Aroostook (54%) and Knox (50%) counties, counties whose growth tends to trail more southern counties.⁵ A large portion of those sales have been to out-of-state individuals; the significant shift to remote work, which is predicted to last long after the pandemic, is attracting people to Maine.⁶ In-migration presents a real opportunity for Maine, but how can we make sure the things that draw people to Maine like our open spaces and abundant wildlife remain? We need to invest in land use planning and technical assistance. Maine Audubon urges this committee to consider how they can better support this incredible need.

Sincerely,



Eliza Donoghue, Esq.
Director of Advocacy

⁵ See *Maine home sales continue to break records despite pandemic*, Portland Press Herald, December 22, 2020 ([link](#)).

⁶ See *Rural Maine is seeing an influx of homebuyers during pandemic*, Bangor Daily News, March 1, 2021 ([link](#)).