



March 3rd, 2021

Testimony by Matthew Nixon of Topsham
In Favor of L.D. 446: An Act to Reestablish the Maine State Planning Office

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and members of the Committee on State and Local Government:

My name is Matt Nixon. I'm the owner of Muddy River Farm Aquaponics, a PhD student at UMaine, a father, a husband, and a Topsham Selectman (though I am by NO means submitting this testimony on behalf of Topsham). Rather, I'm submitting this testimony as a private citizen and as a former employee of the Maine State Planning Office. I worked for the Maine Coastal Program for over 11 years, 8 of them as serving as Deputy Director, served three different Administrations, and, as a result of the actions of one of those Administrations, worked for four different State natural resource agencies. Keep in mind I only applied for one job with Maine State Government, and that was with the Maine State Planning Office (SPO).

I was hired in 2008 under then Governor Baldacci. Part FF of Governor LePage's first biennial budget proposal eliminated the State Planning Office (SPO) and proposed a process by which it would be converted to the Office of Policy and Management. My time at SPO (2008 – July 1, 2012) was initially the most satisfying professional experience of my life. I worked with the most dedicated and intelligent people I had ever worked with up until that point. The institutional knowledge contained within SPO was beyond value. While there, we worked on things like highspeed internet, renewable offshore energy, grid electrification, and ocean and coastal policy that both promoted and used the best available science and equipment. This all probably sounds pretty familiar. Our job was coordination. As a veteran of Maine State Government, I can tell you without question that agencies are "siloed". SPO's job was to alleviate some of that compartmentalization through coordination and communication, among other things.

There was never any real reason given for SPO's dissolution. Most of the talking points at the time focused on government cost cutting (the State spent more money on the dissolution and subsequent and repeated Program musical chairs than the actual general fund savings to the State). Many of SPO's Programs at that time were funded (and still are) by the federal government. The Maine Commission for Community Service, the Maine Floodplain Management Program, and the Maine Coastal Program/Municipal Planning and Assistance Program are all primarily funded by federal grants. Decreasing "red tape" was also another reason given despite the fact that SPO had no regulatory authority.

Planning is a difficult beast to rally behind. It's not really something you can touch (unless it's a 500 lb document that no one will ever read). It's hard to find ROI with planning, the same way it's hard to find accurate ROI on most things of intrinsic value. I can tell you without hesitation that Maine has suffered as a result of its poor investment in planning. Adequate investment in



planning can literally save millions every year through floodzone mapping and fine tuning efforts. It can minimize legal costs to the tax payer if a regulatory agency makes a knee-jerk decision – and it was the wrong decision. It can be used to mitigate unintentional legislative economic and social impacts on industries and the people of the State. If you think about something a lot first, and make sure all the appropriate people are in the room when you discuss it, then one is typically able to avoid nastiness, bad decision-making, and costs to taxpayers. This latter sentiment is precisely what SPO did on issues ranging from the economy to land conservation, to founding the State’s seafloor mapping program.

Maine needs a centralized, non-partisan, non-appointed planning entity with appropriate levels of staffing to work on these issues. As Mr. Ohara has pointed out in his testimony – two of the three “essentials” are there for returning the functions of SPO to the State of Maine. GOPIF is the perfect agency to serve as the backbone of those functions. There is urgency here. As I mentioned, Maine’s municipal planning and support capacity is down to two individuals. The Maine Coastal Program, a program designed to assist coastal communities with technical assistance grants, etc, is at Maine’s fisheries management agency currently. That is one small correction to Mr. OHara’s testimony I wanted to make. I mention this because the Coastal Program literally funds all of the technical assistance grants (and coordinating staff) at the Municipal Planning and Assistance Program. These Program’s capacity to accomplish what their establishing legislation demands has been dramatically altered as a result of their subsequent dispersal after SPO’s dissolution.

I’ll end by echoing similar sentiments as those before me. The co-sponsors of this bill are absolutely on to something. I would encourage the Committee to strongly consider making appropriate amendments where necessary to ensure that Maine’s large, diverse, and vibrant communities receive the planning and technical assistance support they need.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Matt Nixon

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