



Maine Legislature's State and Local Government Committee

March 2, 2021

RE: LD 446 (H.P. 322) "An Act to Reestablish the State Planning Office"

Dear Committee Members:

AVCOG is neither for nor against this legislation. We are a direct recipient of funding from the Municipal Planning Assistance Program (MPAP), which is currently housed in the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry as are other Regional Councils across the state. The funds we receive go towards assisting communities in Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties with implementation of the State's required Shoreland zoning law, Subdivision law and with the Growth Management Act through Comprehensive Planning. In addition, funding helps us guide municipal officials and staff on land use planning topics and laws. Previously, the MPAP program was housed at the State Planning Office.

Over the years, funding to the MPAP has been reduced and funds to cover the costs of Comprehensive Planning and implementation of those plans has been eliminated. This has resulted in many communities not updating their plans or complying with these requirements. Many of our towns have outdated Comprehensive Plans and Shoreland zoning ordinances because there are no longer state funds to provide technical assistance for Regional Councils to help them with the work, and few towns have the capacity themselves.

The attached map was put together for the Climate Council Report and shows in two shades of blue the small number of municipalities that employ a professional planner either on a contract basis or on staff. The remaining organized communities typically rely entirely on a Regional Council for their planning support. In AVCOG's region of 56 municipalities, Lewiston and Auburn have staff planners, and only a couple of additional municipalities contract for planning services.

In addition to complying with state laws, planning is important as it is the primary way a community can regulate what development looks like, and the protection of natural resources from excessive development. It allows a community to think through the impacts economic development will have on local infrastructure and services and plan for how to address future growth and demands. It is an opportunity to bring residents together to work on complex issues

like housing affordability and aging in place. Even in our communities with limited or no growth, development like cellular towers, wind or solar energy production projects, and medical and retail marijuana puts demands on local government that frequently requires support from Regional Councils to guide a Planning Board or Appeals Board project, or with helping a town develop an ordinance to better regulate these new types of development pressures.

Currently planning at the State is so limited that guidance documents are decades old as budgets continue to decline slowly. There is a need for a state planning agency that can analyze impacts on small towns from state legislation and provide resources and support to municipalities and the Regional Councils to do the “boots on the ground” work.

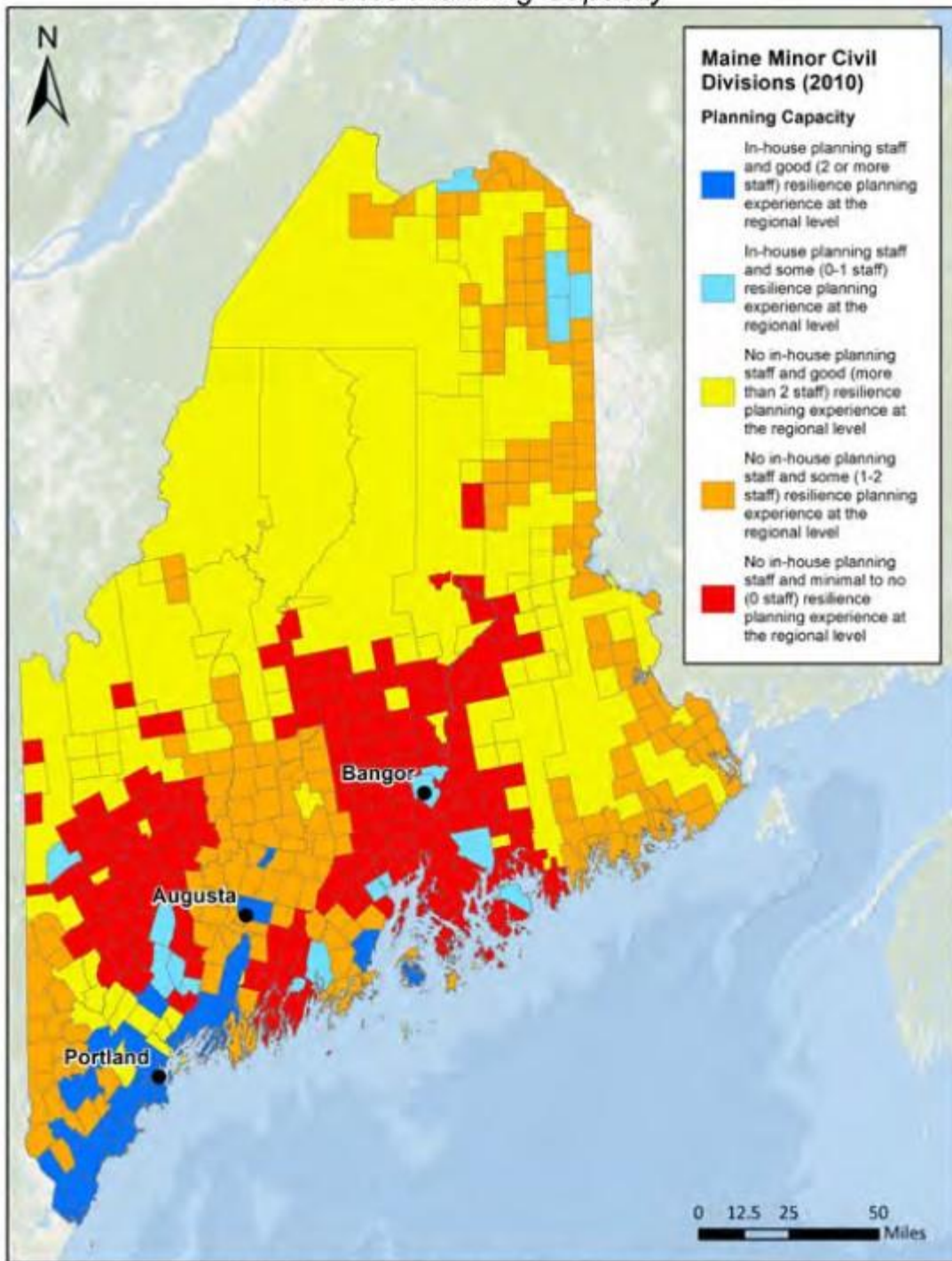
The recent COVID19 pandemic and climate change issues show that it is extraordinarily important for our State as well as its municipalities to be planning for the future. AVCOG neither supports nor opposes this legislation, however we do hope that this will be the start of a process with stakeholders to determine what activities are needed from State Planning to build back a better organization tailored to the current and anticipated future needs, providing leadership and resourcing planning support to municipalities as they face planning challenges in years to come. While technical assistance to municipalities is best provided at the regional level where we have developed a relationship with our communities and know the regional issues, there is an economy of scale by having the State provide tools we can all use. Restoring some of the functions that the former State Planning Office had and possibly adding new ones, would benefit municipalities across the state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shelley Norton".

Shelley Norton, AICP  
Land Use Planner

## Resilience Planning Capacity



**Source:** *Maine Won't Wait, A Four-Year Plan for Climate Action*, p.86 ([PDF link](#))