



March 3, 2021

Testimony by Frank O'Hara of Hallowell  
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 Frank O'Hara. I am a resident of Hallowell. I am here to testify in favor of the LD 446 – but with a twist. By way of background, I have worked in the fields of housing, community development, and planning for the last 40 years in Maine, both in government – at the local, regional, and state levels, including time in the former State Planning Office – and in the private sector, as a principal in the consulting firm Planning Decisions.

I am totally committed to the idea of a planning office in the Executive Branch that accomplishes the three purposes laid out in LD 446:

1. Advice to the Governor on policy matters
2. Assistance to the Legislature with information and analysis
3. Administer financial and technical assistance programs to help build sustainable communities

Here's the twist. Under the Mills Administration, state government already has an office that accomplishes two of the three goals listed: advice to the Governor and assistance to the Legislature on policy matters. That office is called the "Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future."

That Office is ably led by Hannah Pingree, and has already proven its worth in its work on climate change, opioid response, children's issues, economic recovery, and workforce development.

Rather than create a new executive planning office, I would recommend amending the bill to add the third function – local technical and grant assistance – to the responsibilities of the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. This would enable the Office to fully engage local and regional partners to help achieve the state goals in climate, economic development, opioid abuse prevention, and the like. The reality is that in a state as large and diverse as Maine, no state policy goals can be achieved without the partnership of local and regional organizations. This would help the state achieve its goals, and at the same time open up a place of dialogue for local partners to communicate with state government.



What does this mean in practical terms? It would mean moving programs once associated with the former Maine State Planning Office – such as coastal community grants, floodplain management, municipal planning assistance, comprehensive planning (all now located in the Bureau of Resource Information and Land Use Planning at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry) – into the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. This would create the link that is now missing between state policy goals and local implementation. There may be economic development and tourism local grant programs now located in the Maine Department of Economic, and local transportation planning grants at MDOT, that also could be considered for consolidation. It would be of great help to the Maine Municipal Association, regional planning and development organizations, and local governments, to have one agency in state government that understands their issues, and that knows how to administer and coordinate local grant programs to maximum effect.

I commend the sponsors of this bill. You're raising an important issue. But I recommend that you look in a different direction than setting up a new office; rather, strengthen the successful office you already have.

Thank you.

The unit must be independent. It can't be tied to individual programs or other activities, or else its recommendations will not be seen as disinterested by other managers. The unit must be close to the CEO. Everyone in the organization must have an incentive to cooperate. The unit must focus on the long-term, and not day-to-day issues and controversies. This is the design of the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future.

The problems Maine faces – climate change, the need to attract young families, health care costs – need long-term answers. Those answers will require the skills embedded in multiple state agencies, as well as in local government, the private sector, and nonprofits. This Office needs a staff that is capable of defining these issues, researching them, engaging the best and brightest experts in these fields, and working with the experts to develop a consensus solution.



Let me conclude with a story President Kennedy liked to tell. Once there was a distinguished French general who retired to his home in the country. He wanted to plant an oak tree in his yard, and told his gardener about it. The gardener objected, "General, that tree won't grow tall for 50 or 60 years." The general replied, "In that case, plant it this very day."

The future is pressing on the State of Maine. Create the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future, and put it to work this very day. Thank you.