



Testimony Submitted to the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

in support of

LD 1034, An Act To Provide Funding To Support the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations

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Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government:

My name is Keith Bisson and I live in Brunswick. I am the President of Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI), and am testifying on behalf of CEI **in strong support of LD 1034**, An Act To Provide Funding To Support the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations.

As you know, LD 1034 provides funding for staff to support the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations. Without funding, the Permanent Commission's important work of addressing systemic racism in Maine will be severely constrained.

I was honored to be appointed to the Permanent Commission in 2019 to serve in the seat representing Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs). As someone born in the state (though not indigenous), it has been humbling for me to serve with my fellow Commissioners, whose membership spans, and leadership enlists, the breadth of Maine's diversity. This shift in paradigm represents an opportunity for Maine to foster innovation and develop talent. I have learned to see many things that I've often overlooked, such as the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people of color as well as our incarcerated population. It's become even more evident to me that when we deliberately address these challenges with a racial equity lens, we develop solutions that benefit all Maine people.

Prior to my role on the Commission, I had the honor to serve on the steering committee for the State's 10-year economic development strategy. I am very proud of my work on the 10-year plan and I believe that it aligns well with the work of the Commission, which can help ensure that the results of the plan support broadly shared prosperity in the state.

My role on the Commission is one way that I and CEI are trying to do our part to address structural racism and other systems that perpetuate inequity and prevent Maine from achieving truly broadly shared prosperity. I am proud of CEI's track record of work with people and communities with low incomes and low wealth, immigrants and refugees, women, and people of color. Looking ahead, we seek to work with immigrant and refugee partners and entrepreneurs while engaging more intensively with



partners in Maine's African-American, LatinX, and Native American communities, by developing financing products, processes and resources that better meet the needs of entrepreneurs in these communities.

Simultaneously, we are doing work internally on our communications practices, human resources, and lending practices and policies to identify how we can ensure that our work benefits and embraces all Mainers.

This is important to CEI. As one of more than a thousand community development financial institutions (CDFIs) working for economic, social, and environmental justice nationwide, we are dedicated to working in partnership with organizations, businesses, legislators, and communities to advance equitable opportunity and create an economy that lifts all people. Nearly 80 percent of our business financing and advice goes to enterprises led by or creating opportunities for people with low incomes or in communities with low incomes.

This bill provides the Permanent Commission with the funding necessary to secure dedicated staffing and administrative support needed to continue this work and to pursue its imperative mission. The Commission operates with limited, temporary, administrative staff support, funded by a one-time allocation of \$50,000. Without adequate financial resources to recruit and retain staff, the Commission's work will be severely limited.

This bill directs funding to two key areas critical to the Commission's work:

- **Full-time staffing.** This includes an Executive Director and other administrative and program staff. At the direction of commissioners, their work would include meeting coordination and facilitation, conducting research, drafting written materials for commissioners to review, organizing public engagement, including public hearings, maintaining a public web presence, and raising philanthropic funds for special initiatives.
- **Administrative expenses.** Like any organization that is tasked with a significant amount of work, the Permanent Commission will incur the cost of maintaining a website, office space, travel expenses, stipends for commissioners, and more.

In response to landmark events and evolving statewide dialogue about racial equity, we respectfully recommend several changes to the bill, including additional resources. The Permanent Commission recently underwent a work-planning process that resulted in the formation of five new subcommittees: one for each of the three branches of government, plus a Community Outreach subcommittee and a Finance and Operations subcommittee, of which I am a member. Our subcommittees have identified the breadth of work that has been assigned/delegated to the Commission.

In addition, the resources we seek are a reflection that the commission is needed to take on work that is not being done by other entities. It is an essential hub. Last summer we responded to the state's need to take steps towards addressing systemic racism. This legislative session, there are multiple bills directing us to examine specific issues that are very relevant to their area of jurisdiction and our mission and



purpose. The Permanent Commission requires additional resources to fund this work, including any special projects.

Thank you for considering this testimony in strong support of LD 1034. CEI urges you to vote Ought to Pass. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or would like additional information about CEI and our efforts to promote shared prosperity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Keith R. Bisson", is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Keith Bisson
President