

Testimony of Jonathan French, P.E. in Support of LD 2121 An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Jonathan French, I live in Hallowell and I am a licensed professional engineer in Maine with over 25 years in state government. I have spent almost 23 of those years at the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT), where I currently serve as the Engineering Data Manager for the Bureau of Project Development, and I've been in that position for over three years. I regret that I am unable to testify before you at the public hearing, but I am in strong support of LD 2121 because it's become increasingly clear to me that I may be one of the last state employees with my years of experience or less that is still planning on spending their entire career in state government. If we don't do something to change that, we won't have a state workforce that can adequately perform the necessary work for the people of Maine.

As the Engineering Data Manager, I have the responsibility for administering the CADD software for the Department, including the training of employees. Currently we are in the middle of a migration to a new drafting and design software. This software will likely need to have MaineDOT changing versions every 18 months due to the vendor requirements. It took about five years for Department staff to gain core competency in the legacy design software when it was introduced in 2005. I wonder if staff will even remain with MaineDOT long enough to gain similar competency in the new software before they leave, because with just the basic knowledge of the software they are extremely desirable for other employers who are looking for Department work. Will I have to have continuous training of just the fundamental skills due to turnover of employees? If so, what will that do to budgets, as well as production?

When I left my position as a transportation engineer for the Bureau's Highway Program in September of 2020 to serve in the position I have now, I was the senior most designer in a production role and had over 19 years of experience in designing projects. Now, the most senior designer in production has less than ten years of experience, and I am curious how long they will actually stay with the Department. Most of the designers on the two remaining internal teams in the Program have less than five years of experience. The Bridge Program in the Bureau has also turned over personnel with several new entry level engineers being hired in the last few years. Retirements and promotions to supervisory and management positions have occurred, but there have been many employees leaving for other employers as well.

Some employees have left for municipal or federal positions, while the majority have left for the private sector. This means that taxpayer dollars have been used, and are now still potentially being used to train employees for private sector companies. However, in that situation, in order to continue to be able to produce work, the Department not only has to attempt to hire a new employee and invest in more training for them to fill the vacancy, but also has to hire the company that recruited the former state worker to do the work. In some cases the company will also have that employee do the same exact project work that they were doing before, only now under a contract and for a significant profit for that company at taxpayer expense. I've been reminded of this recently, as I've seen these former employees in multiple meetings I've had with consultants to explain how to set up the new design software so they can do contracted work for the Department.

It's now time to ask the question: what do we want the state government workforce to look like in the decade ahead? Do we want our state government to continue to be a training ground for the private sector, and use taxpayer dollars to develop employees for companies who will use them to profit from state contracts at taxpayer expense? Do we want to erode the state workforce to the point where we are totally reliant on the private sector to deliver state services at whatever profit margin they desire? I would hope the answers to these questions would be "no."

The alternative is at least attempting to try to retain a core workforce with the competency and skills that are needed to provide quality public services and protect that investment that taxpayers have made in the training of the current state workforce. LD 2121 will give the State the ability to make that attempt with funding a new compensation and classification system for Executive Branch workers, as well as create changes to statute for recruitment and retention adjustments. It would also require the State to work with bargaining agents to create recruiting programs that address chronic understaffing in certain agencies, and provide continuous legislative oversight of the vacancies that exist in each department.

In 2011, in testimony I warned the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee at the time that the state budgets proposed to erode state employee benefits would "devalue Maine's public sector work and employees by continuing to 'tax' state employee benefits and salaries while increasing expectations and demands" and I stated that if that happened "I doubt many will even want to consider becoming a state employee."

The budgets passed with that erosion, especially to health insurance and retirement benefits, and salaries stagnated due to minimal wage increases. Employees left and those who remained were forced to pick up the slack in a successful bid by the LePage

administration to shrink the state workforce and make public sector work unattractive. Now, in spite of fair contracts during the Mills administration, with larger wage increases than were seen with the prior administration, Maine state government is still struggling to fill positions. It simply can't compete with other employers because of the decline in desirability of public sector work, and the lower wages and eroded benefits. Job security was always a selling point with state employment with benefits for seniority. However, with younger workers willing to be quite mobile in their career path to take advantage of companies competing for workers, especially in engineering, those benefits of security and seniority are no longer as important as wages and income.

It has reached the point that now Department management is just looking for candidates to apply for a position and they will decide what role to put them in if the one they apply for does not work out. They just want to "get the person in the door." I remember when I first applied for a seasonal highway laborer position to "get my foot in the door" as a college student and now it's being left wide open and nobody wants to walk through. That is where we are now, so something has to change.

The State of Maine has to have competitive wages to recruit qualified workers and it has to maintain that competitiveness in order to retain them. Therefore, I strongly urge the members of the Committee to vote "ought to pass" for LD 2121. Please give the State of Maine the means it needs to recruit and retain a state government workforce that can consistently provide quality services, as well as the legislative oversight necessary to protect that investment in the state workforce by Maine taxpayers. Thank you.