

February 7, 2024

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, members of the Committee on State and Local Government,

My name is Kerem Gungor. I am a senior environmental engineer at DEP Bureau of Land Resources. I am writing this testimony to express my personal experience with engineer recruitment and share my personal thoughts with the Committee in support of LD 2121, An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions, sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine.

I am currently supervising two environmental engineers and two assistant environmental engineers. I have one vacant assistant environmental engineer position in my team. The Bureau of Land Resources relies on my team's technical expertise to ensure that the land development projects are permitted in compliance with the state's stormwater regulations so that their impact on Maine's waters is mitigated.

Since I assumed this supervisory position in March 2022, I tried to recruit for the vacant environmental engineer position which requires the successful candidate to have a "professional engineer" license issued by the State Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers. None of the applicants was qualified for the position; hence, we could not move forward with interviews and fill the position. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence. Before I assumed the senior environmental engineer position, the Bureau attempted to hire an environmental engineer. This attempt was also unsuccessful. Non-competitive salary is a major reason hampering recruitment. I must note that DEP provides 11% stipend on top of the base pay for the engineers. Even the pay augmented with this stipend does not attract qualified professionals.

Another evidence that demonstrates the non-competitive nature of the current pay schedule is as follows: successful candidates almost always negotiate to start at a higher step since Step 1 pay offered to new employees by policy is too low for most candidates to accept. Supervisory staff like me allocate a significant amount of their time into employee recruitment efforts and find themselves unable to fill vacancies due to the pay gap which is beyond their control. I believe that it is past time to address the pay gap and re-adjust the base pay schedules to eliminate the need for stopgap measures like providing stipends for the engineers.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide my personal testimony on this important issue.

Respectfully submitted,
Kerem Gungor
Oakland