

Testimony in favor of

LD 2003: An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Increase Housing Opportunities in Maine by Studying Zoning and Land Use Restrictions

Committee on Labor and Housing

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Good morning Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and members of the Committee.

My name is Luisa Deprez. I am Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University of Southern Maine with a 50-year record of working toward the elimination of poverty. I am also a member of the Housing Working Group of the Maine Alliance for Health and Prosperity and a Commissioner of The Portland Housing Authority. In my years of research and work on poverty, housing continually leaps to the top of the list as a central concern of many individuals and families.

Since at least the Great Recession the US has failed to build enough homes to meet the demand created by the population, especially those at the lower tiers of the income scale. The pandemic brought concerns about housing, food, education, and health to a new level of public consciousness. But for decades before, little progress had been made in ensuring stability and security for families in any of these areas. A significant segment of the populace – nationally and in Maine - lacks a safe, secure, sound place to live.

In Maine, the housing situation is dire. One elementary school principal told a colleague who is researching rural housing, that as many as 30% of children in the school experience transient housing insecurity resulting in instability at the school and community level. In Portland right now, there are over 4500 applicants on the public housing waitlist. With the shutdown of motel lodging for new immigrants in South Portland and the stoppage of moderate housing development in Cape Elizabeth we can expect the situation to remain of heightened concern. I will skip the part about the corresponding increase in new construction of million-dollar condos and luxury hotels which the bill could also address.

While there is no single answer for the array of issues on the table – housing for the homeless, for special need persons, affordable rent, safe housing replete with plumbing, electricity and heat, as well as first-time home ownership opportunities – we must begin somewhere and considerations of zoning as proposed in LD 2003 is a good start.

This legislation focuses how we can use the space now at hand in the most effective way possible to increase safe, affordable housing availability. One aspect is allowing ADU's on plots of land with now restrictive zoning. While the costs associated with design planning and permitting remain, there are ways of addressing that also.

Los Angeles has allowed the building of ADU's since 2017. They now account for 22% of newly-permitted housing units. Recently, they moved to making them less costly to build. There are now over 25 pre-approved designs from which to choose. The result of the city partnering with local architects. Opting for one of these designs can help simplify, expedite and reduce the cost

of overall permitting processes, offering consumers access to builders, protection, and plans with flexible designs. This can drive down the cost while increasing housing options.

There is no doubt that Maine needs more housing, in all areas of the state – rural, urban, suburban, north, south, east and west. But we also need more flexibility in how we address the housing needs in diverse communities around the state. Approaching zoning restrictions that can allow for that flexibility and stimulate more creativity is a very important start.

Thank you.