

**TESTIMONY OF THE MAINE ASSOCIATION OF PLANNERS
TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
INNOVATION, DEVELOPMENT, ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT AND
BUSINESS**

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY PROVIDED IN SUPPORT OF LD 1694
An Act to Create the Maine Redevelopment Land Bank Authority
DATE OF HEARING: Thursday, May 13, 2021**

**Honorable Senator Chip Curry, Honorable Representative Tiffany Roberts,
Distinguished Members of the Committee on Innovation, Development,
Economic Advancement and Business:**

My name is Matt Nazar, and I am the Director of Development Services for the City of Augusta and have been a practicing land use planner for the last 29 years. I am providing testimony on behalf of the Maine Association of Planners Legislative Policy Committee to testify in support of LD 1694. The Maine Association of Planners, or MAP, is an organization of over 100 members, including professional public, private, and nonprofit planners, citizen volunteers serving on local boards, and Mainers from other professions like attorneys, landscape architects, professors, and developers. Though our membership works in diverse settings, we are all dedicated to enhancing the practice of planning in Maine.

Maine has a large number of blighted and vacant buildings which our municipalities don't have the tools and money to address on their own. Augusta, unfortunately has its fair share. I manage the planners, code enforcement officers, and economic developers for the city and even combining the tools available to each of these disciplines, there are buildings we are unable to get back into productive use. The owners have walked away, but continue to stay one step ahead of tax foreclosure, or as is more often the case, the owner has walked away and the bank is in pre-foreclosure, continuing to pay the taxes. I've had my staff calling the Philippines and Germany to try to get in touch with bank asset managers. I've had economic development staff camp out of hours in the lobby of attorney's offices in Portland who were representing these far flung mortgage holders with my staff trying to get any action on these properties. When the properties are in a downtown, they are dark holes in the fabric of an otherwise vibrant area. When they are in neighborhoods, they become run down poorly maintained shells of once beautiful homes. And around the edges of these



places, they become attractive to nuisances bringing down neighboring property values and are easy targets for vandals.

Augusta and other municipalities have made great strides with the tools we have. Just this week, one of Augusta's downtown restaurants was informed it will grace the cover of the June 2021 Downeast Magazine Where to Eat. Just 30 months ago, the building it occupies was in different ownership and badly deteriorating condition. Augusta's code enforcement officers and economic development team worked with the owner and another local developer, got the building to change hands, and now the business located there will be seen and read about around the country. The two upstairs apartments are also fully renovated and rented out. We need to maintain this momentum as we emerge from the pandemic economy.

But these success stories cannot be replicated in situations where we effectively have a zombie property with an owner who has walked away and a bank or mortgage company that does not care. For these properties, more tools must be created, and having the ability to form a state level land bank is one of the tools that will help. Because funding is scarce and communities have few ways to incentivize development in areas that are resilient, have infrastructure, and provide community benefits, the Development Ready Communities program is another tool that will provide that carrot to help our communities attract development that will benefit local businesses and residents.

MAP would be happy to answer any questions you may have about our testimony and would be pleased to work with the committee as it considers LD 1694.