Natural Resources Council of Maine

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Testimony in Support of LD 1756, An Act to Establish a Statewide Transportation Project Selection Prioritization Process

To the Committee on Transportation
by Josh Caldwell, Climate and Clean Energy Policy Advocate for NRCM
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Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and distinguished members of the Committee on Transportation, my name is Josh Caldwell, and I am here on behalf of the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM) in support of LD 1756, An Act to Establish a Statewide Transportation Project Selection Prioritization Process. NRCM is Maine's leading nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to protecting Maine's environment, with nearly 20,000 supporters statewide and beyond.

We see a lot of value in establishing a transparent project selection process with stakeholder engagement opportunities that can be updated and adjusted regularly over time. Such a process would withstand fluctuations in political leadership while advancing Maine's transportation goals in a transparent manner.

Ensuring state transportation project selection criteria and processes are transparent and clear is a growing area of consensus nationwide. A Brookings Institute survey of best practices across all 50 state DOTs found that a major barrier to effective project implementation for 33 states, including Maine, is the "failure to use public facing project selection systems."[1] The Union of Concerned Scientists' "Freedom to Move" report last year found that "prioritizing projects in meaningful ways" and making "transportation decision-making processes representative, and meaningfully engag[ing] the people and communities most affected by proposed projects" are keys to increasing transportation options for Americans.[2] Finally, the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy identified state DOT project selection processes as the critical area of

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[1] Brookings Institute, *Connecting the DOTs: A survey of state transportation planning, investments, and accountability practices,* November 12 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/connecting-the-dots-a-survey-of-state-transportation-planning-investment-and-accountability-practices/

[2] Union of Concerned Scientists, *Freedom to Move,* October 2024, https://www.ucs.org/resources/freedom-move

reform to effectively reduce transportation pollution, highlighting Virginia's Smart Scale program as an effective model for other states.[3]

This approach would bring great value to Maine as well. It would:

- Provide community engagement opportunities and clarity for communities seeking funding for projects;
- Communicate how new projects fit into the overall aims of Maine's transportation system;
- Encourage development that aligns with established statewide goals; and
- Show Maine taxpayers that their dollars are being put to the best possible use, increasing trust and transparency with state agencies.

Our transportation system is facing a funding shortfall of $280 million by 2027. Multiple priorities are competing for limited funding, throwing Maine DOT, in Commissioner Van Note's words, into "MacGyver mode," triaging immediate needs rather than advancing a vision of our transportation system that meets a greater proportion of expressed need. A transparent project selection process would not solve the transportation funding shortfall, but it would ensure that program administrators and project applicants are on the same page about priorities each year, reducing conflict and increasing collaboration.

As the Vice Chair of the Public Transit Advisory Council (PTAC), I've had the opportunity over the last year to hear feedback from dozens of transit providers across the state. One of the primary recommendations to emerge from the PTAC report this year, based on feedback from transit providers, is to increase transparency in MDOT decision making so that transit providers can better anticipate funding levels and understand the rationale that goes into project selection. This would allow project applicants to better understand the criteria that would define a successful project and would increasingly lead to stronger project applications that are more aligned with statewide goals.

It is our understanding that a program such as this would not affect the repair and maintenance of our existing transportation infrastructure but would only apply to new projects. This way, new proposals that would add to our transportation system would be assessed and approved based on objective criteria that align with state and regional goals, building trust, and reducing wasted efforts by local and regional agencies and planners.

Virginia's Smart Scale program was initiated in 2014, and the legislation establishing that program passed in their legislature unanimously. The authors of that program report that their experience since 2014 has been overwhelmingly positive. Transportation planning and decision

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[3] ACEEE, Driving Emissions Reduction through Project Prioritization, March 27 2025, https://www.aceee.org/white-paper/2025/03/driving-emissions-reduction-through-project-prioritization-insights-state

making is always going to be challenging, but their process has reduced conflict and increased transparency for stakeholders and the general public, leading to better trust of the Virginia DOT.

This session, we've seen several areas of tension around the best way to move forward on progressing our statewide transportation system. A clear project selection process, as this bill would establish, will provide all parties engaged in transportation planning and advocacy with a shared understanding of decision-making rationale and an opportunity to provide feedback to the project selection process.

For these reasons, we urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1756. Thank you for your consideration, and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.