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Testimony in Opposition to LD 727, An Act To Protect the Tax Base of Municipalities by Removing the Property Tax Exemption for Land Held for Conservation or Public Access Purposes

**Garrison Beck, Director of Water Conservation
April 12, 2017**

Senator Dow, Representative Tipping, and distinguished members of the Committee on Taxation,

My name is Garrison Beck and I am the Director of Water Conservation for Midcoast Conservancy. Midcoast Conservancy's mission is to protect and promote healthy lands, waters, and communities through conservation, outdoor adventure, and learning. We work in the lands and waters surrounding the Sheepscot River and Damariscotta Lake, from Wiscasset to Montville. We are supported by 1,600 members who live throughout midcoast and central Maine and beyond.

We submit this testimony today in strong opposition to LD 727. Midcoast Conservancy was formed on January 1, 2016 out of the merger of four existing land trusts which had collectively been working in this region for at least 125 years. As one organization, we own 70 parcels across 29 properties in 13 different towns, and hold conservation easements on 51 additional properties, resulting in a total of **6,300 acres** of land conserved across the midcoast region. These lands provide **public access** for hunting, biking, hiking, and other recreation, as well as access to lakes and rivers for fishing, paddling, and boating.

Each of our four parent organizations had crafted their own arrangements regarding the taxation of lands held in conservation. Policies varied between organizations and towns. Now as one, our lands staff has been working diligently to inventory these various arrangements across our 366 square mile service area. We have begun the process of developing taxation agreements for all of our 3,000 acres of owned property.

By and large what we have found is that every town prefers a different solution, some even differ between properties within one town. If the land qualifies, some towns prefer that land be placed in the Tree Growth Tax Program, others prefer an agreed-upon payment in-lieu of taxes, other towns still another agreement. With the vast variation between the needs of individual towns and even the services provided by individual properties, one thing is clear: **there is no one solution**. Removing the property tax exemption for property held in conservation would remove the flexibility for towns and land conservation professionals to work in conjunction for an equitable solution.

There is no one answer to how land trusts contribute to their host communities. Midcoast Conservancy has made and is making a number of individual arrangements within the 13 towns in which we hold conservation land, each of which depends on the needs of the town:

- Tax exempt: ~750 acres in three towns
- Enrolled in the Open Space Tax Program: ~1,200 acres in three towns
- Full tax: ~4 acres in one town
- Within a single town, a combination of full tax, reduced tax, and payments in lieu of tax: ~1,050 acres in five towns
- Full tax paid by donor: ~10 acres in one town

In addition to these contributions, Midcoast Conservancy provides numerous economic benefits to our host communities by protecting waterfront property sensitive to development, protecting and improving water quality, improving fish passage and recreational fishing opportunities, and providing outdoor recreation opportunities to children and families.

Maine has a long history of public access to private lands. However, over the past 30 years Maine's landscape has shifted from one owned by few large landowners who allow public access, to many more small landowners who are more often choosing to post their properties to restrict the outdoor recreation opportunities which we all value. While they may be privately held, **Midcoast Conservancy's lands are never posted**, and will remain **open to public use** as a condition of our mission to serve the people of Maine. **Removing this property tax exemption would quite simply restrict the opportunities for Maine people to enjoy Maine's outdoors.**

For these reasons, Midcoast Conservancy urges you to oppose LD 727. We would be glad to answer any questions.

Thank you,



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