

**TESTIMONY OF MARGARET A. WESTON,
CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, UNIVERSITY OF MAINE SYSTEM**

Regarding LD 2173,

**“An Act To Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the
Expenditures of State Government and To Change Certain Provisions of the Law
Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years
Ending June 30, 2008 and June 30, 2009”**

Chairwoman Rotundo, Chairman Fischer, and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

Chairman Bowman, Chairwoman Norton, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Meg Weston. I'm a businessperson, and I live in Yarmouth. I also serve as the Chair of the University of Maine System Board of Trustees. I am here today on behalf of my fellow trustees and on behalf of the 45,000 students of Maine's public universities. I serve in this role because as a businessperson and citizen of this state, I believe there is no more important investment in our future than higher education.

Our Board exists to ensure the academic quality, affordability, and accessibility of Maine's public universities. We expect our universities to operate efficiently, effectively, and with accountability. We know that Maine's universities make a difference in the lives of thousands of Maine people, fuel Maine's economy, and improve Maine's quality of life.

We are already under great financial pressure to control spending and, at the same time, to expand our contributions to Maine's educational, cultural, and economic well-being. Our Chancellor and presidents have cut millions of dollars from administrative and operating costs in order to balance their budgets and to re-allocate resources back into the academic programs and services that are needed by the communities they serve.

As all of you know, in recent years the State's support for our universities has not come close to offsetting the escalating costs of energy, healthcare, and other operating expenses. In addition to increasing operating efficiencies and tightening financial controls, we've had to increase student tuition and fees 39% over the last five years. This is the revenue source of last resort—student tuition increases—to protect and sustain academic quality.

You might think that the University system can absorb additional cuts, because we can always turn to tuition. Collectively however, we have to be careful not to price students and their families out of the opportunity to attend one of our universities. We are currently 8th in the country in the number of low income students that go to college. That's good news and bad news. It means we're doing a good job of welcoming and attracting those students, but it means that we're serving students with limited financial

resources. In fact, three-quarters of our students receive financial aid; 23% of that aid is funded by our universities themselves.

The proposed de-appropriation in LD 2173 does, indeed, threaten to price students out of Maine's public universities. It is a cut that would move both the university system and the state backwards, not forward. As trustees, we have a moral and statutory responsibility to speak out about the consequences of the budget proposal on current and prospective students, their families, and the many diverse interests the University of Maine System serves. It would be irresponsible of us not to do so.

There is no question that the cut proposed in LD 2173 would cause serious, short-term and long-term consequences for Maine residents, Maine businesses and industries, and the state's economy. Whether it's the Brookings Report, the Maine Economic Growth Council, or other assessments of Maine's present and future, it's widely understood that investment in Maine's public universities is part of the revenue cure, not the problem.

A cut to the University of Maine System's appropriation—especially one of the magnitude proposed in LD 2173—would be counter-productive to the State's economic interests and condition. Maine cannot afford to weaken its universities. Studies have shown that higher education contributes not only to the economy and to the lifetime earning capacity of graduates, but that it also reduces the likelihood that these individuals will depend on the State for social services support. Maine cannot afford to undermine the universities' ability to create jobs, products, technologies, and more through research and development. Maine cannot afford to dilute the ability of its universities to serve as partners and resources in improving our state and its quality of life.

And without question, Maine cannot afford to put barriers in front of students who want and need a college degree. On behalf of my colleagues on the Board, I respectfully ask you to reject the proposed cut to the University of Maine System. Instead, let us be your partners in improving Maine's economy.

Thank you.