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**Testimony in support of
LD 2082: An Act to Preserve Successful Historic Neighborhood Schools**

Presented by Christopher Glass, President, Maine Preservation Board of Trustees
February 13, 2008
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon Chairman Bowman and Chairman Norton and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

I am Christopher Glass, President of the board of Maine Preservation, speaking on behalf of Maine Preservation's 900 member households across Maine and our many constituents, regarding LD2082, which we strongly support.

This one rule change will permit more creative responses to meeting the energy efficiency goals in existing schools. Currently the rule is a "one size fits all" that penalizes existing buildings and rewards new construction.

In the year 2000, Maine Preservation placed Maine's Historic Neighborhood Schools on our annual list of Most Endangered Historic Properties, and the situation has only gotten worse in succeeding years. The rules governing the decision whether to renovate existing schools or build new ones are written to favor new construction. Numerous examples exist nationwide of successful historic school renovations meeting safety and energy needs while expanding to incorporate new infrastructure, technology and modern access, but Maine's rules discourage adopting the innovative techniques that have been developed nationally. The rules you will hear about in the next bill all converge to make consideration of the tradition, continuity, and character of our existing school buildings irrelevant or even a negative factor in the decision process. A current example is the Nathan Clifford School in Portland, which inspires civic pride as the anchor of its neighborhood, and could demonstrate by example how Portland respects its historic landmarks and also its stated goals of preserving neighborhoods.

The rules of the Department of Education are a powerful force working against the goal of healthy communities and towards the unintended goal of unfocused, unplanned, uncoordinated dispersal of development throughout the countryside.

And the kinds of facilities these rules produce are, in the judgement of many of us who have studied these things, not serving our children or our society well.

Since I was a teacher for 20 years, I can't resist taking this opportunity to explain to you what I see the history of our idea of school has been and is now, so you can understand why we feel the way we do.

Our first schools were based on the idea of the house. Often the unmarried schoolteacher lived upstairs and taught in the rooms below. As schools grew, they became one-room buildings that looked like the churches or town halls of the village — the most important public buildings, with dignity and evident purpose, teaching citizenship and moral values along with the three R's. Later, schools came to resemble office buildings and mills, because they were training our young people to take up their places in the workforce that made America such a power in the world economy. But in the last half of the last century, the suburban movement changed what schools looked like again — low buildings with classrooms strung along corridors and anchored by auditorium and gymnasium blocks. They in fact came to look like shopping centers, with stores strung along malls anchored by department stores and surrounded by acres of parking.

To us in preservation, this history mirrors a change in society, where we have moved away from identifying ourselves as citizens of a town, through being workers in a growing economy, to being consumers, useful not for what we produce but for what we buy. Schools, like shopping centers, try to be entertaining, hoping that students will be encouraged to “buy” what is being “sold”. Like shopping centers, they depend on the car for access, and the region, not the neighborhood, for customers, and they depend on mothers for taxi service.

Our historic schools teach different lessons about life. As one of my teachers said about growing up in the city, the dignity and seriousness of the school and library buildings sent the message that these buildings were important, that the doors to the school were the doors to the power that came from knowledge, that they were the gateway to opportunity, and, in a fundamental sense, to the active citizenship that is the only true guardian of freedom.

The rules you will be discussing in this bill and the others to follow are about more than efficiency and cost. They are about what we are teaching our children. That they don't address these issues is one of the tragedies of our times. I ask you to understand why our older schools are important signals of who we have been, and who we need to become again.

I urge you to support this bill as one small step in the right direction.

Thank you.