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To the Esteemed Members of the Freeport Town Council:

Thank you so much for inviting me to deliver a summary of the work done in the first session of the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature, and how those measures impact our community. My favorite part of the job as your State Representative is connecting and helping the people of our town with their questions and concerns. It is an honor to do so, and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve in this role.

I have organized this report by subject area. I have included information from the supplemental budget which passed on July 19, 2021, as well as key bills in those areas which are now law (links are provided for many of the subject areas for further information.) Some areas were also funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. It is worth noting that the supplemental budget (as well as the baseline budget passed in March 2021) were passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, and reflect investments in many areas that our community identified for me as high priority. This summary is not inclusive of all the good work done this session, so I invite members of the Council and anyone in Freeport to connect with me by phone or email for more information or to answer questions.

Tax Relief:

- The budget raised **municipal revenue sharing** funding levels to help stabilize property taxes. (A reminder that revenue sharing is a percentage of the State Government's sales, service provider, personal and corporate income tax receipts for the month, which is returned to municipalities.) This brings critical relief to our town by [raising revenue sharing](#) from 3.75% to 4.5% in Fiscal Year 2022 and to 5% in Fiscal Year 2023. This change results in a 61% increase over Freeport's FY22 budget line, going from to actual FY 2021 of \$525,000 to \$847,493.08 at the 4.5% level.
- We expanded the [Property Tax Fairness credit](#), permanently changing the eligibility for the program to provide property tax relief or rent relief to an additional 83,000 Mainers. The program also provides a one-time boost in the maximum benefit in tax year 2021 from \$750 to \$1,200 for income-eligible families, and \$1,000 to \$1,500 for seniors.
- The budget provided a one-time boost in the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#) rate for tax year 2021 for all eligible individuals as 20% of the federal earned income credit for the same taxable year (instead of 12%). There was a bill to make that permanent, but it did not pass.

- Maine increased its reimbursements to municipalities for the [Homestead Exemption Program](#), a program which allows Mainers to take \$25,000 off the value of their home and only pay property taxes on the remaining amount. Municipalities are currently reimbursed for 70% of that cost. Due to an amendment I helped broker in the Taxation Committee, that reimbursement will work its way up to 100%.
- [LD 1638](#), which became law and will go into effect Oct. 18, 2021, re-establishes the state **Senior Tax Deferral program** (which was suspended in 1991). It provides property tax relief to thousands of Mainers who are 65 or older and earn less than \$40,000 per year. The state will pay the property taxes for people who apply and qualify, but the state will have the authority to obtain a lien on the applicant's real estate. More on this bill can be found [here](#).
- **The budget set money aside for emergencies by adding more than \$282 million to the Rainy-Day Fund.** This brings the total to \$491.9 million — a historic high.

#### Health and Wellness:

- An estimated 217,000 Mainers will gain access to **regular dental care** through this budget. I testified on behalf of the [bills](#) to expand MaineCare to cover dental benefits, which will prevent costly emergency room visits and cut health care costs statewide.
- The budget addressed the **long-term care workforce** shortage by raising MaineCare wage rates for essential support workers to 125% of the minimum wage. These workers provide quality, compassionate and personalized care to Maine people who are older and have disabilities. This includes our Independence Association facility here in Freeport. I also passed a bill which streamlined the process of credentialing for mental health rehabilitation clinicians, who work with some of our most vulnerable populations, as we face a critical workforce shortage in this area.
- We supported **senior living facilities** by including critical funding to maintain emergency rate increases that support nursing facilities and the hardworking professionals who care for the residents. We have several of these facilities in Freeport as well.
- The budget invests in community treatment options and rate increases to treat **substance use disorder** and prevent overdose deaths. A new, intensive outpatient program has also been funded to address the gap in Maine's **behavioral health services system**.
- The budget reallocates some of the funding for Long Creek Youth Development Center to **support new, community-based juvenile housing** and programming to divert young people in Maine from entering the correctional system and improve youth access to therapeutic services.
- I cosponsored a [bill](#) to establish a universal health care system in Maine (sometimes called MaineCare for All), which did pass both chambers and became law in July. It is contingent upon action by the federal government (which is pending) to authorize the states to obtain a waiver to establish a state-based universal health care plan and to receive federal financing for that plan. This bill is a key step in the process.

### Schools:

- The budget finally fulfills the state’s commitment to Maine schools, municipalities, and teachers by **funding 55%** of K-12 public education costs (up from 51.7%.) RSU5 was scheduled to receive significantly less this coming fiscal year from the state, due to a 7% rise in valuation, and a 2% drop in economically-disadvantaged/special education populations, and the impact of those factors in the way school funding is calculated. This funding could not have come then at a better time, and will result in an allocation of \$433,194.66 to RSU5.
- Maine has also set aside funds to keep **free breakfast and lunch available to all students**. Many families experiencing food insecurity do not qualify for school meals under the current eligibility guidelines, and hunger can have substantial negative impacts on students’ learning outcomes. With this measure, we set up more students for academic success. RSU5 Nutrition Director Erin Dow and I also are participating this summer in a taskforce to End Hunger in Maine by 2030.
- We took steps to **prevent tuition increases** in higher education by investing in the University of Maine System, Maine Community College System and Maine Maritime Academy, which many of our young Freeport residents attend, by adding to the general Fund amount and increasing scholarship allocations.
- My [bill](#) to expand the number of **school-based health centers** in the state passed with unanimous, bipartisan support out of the Health and Human Services Committee, and with unanimous support from both chambers of the Legislature. I am working on the funding piece as it is supported currently through the Fund for Healthy Maine, and needs additional resources.

### Environment:

- The budget includes \$40 million for the **Land for Maine’s Future** program to ramp up Maine’s land conservation efforts. These funds will play a vital role in supporting Maine’s outdoor recreation economy and Maine’s tourism economy.
- There is \$4.75 million in funding for municipal partnership projects to **improve climate resilience and emission reductions** at the local level through planning and implementation grants administered by the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future.
- The budget includes crucial funds to **address PFAS contamination**, known as “forever chemicals,” in Maine’s groundwater and soil. Cleaning up existing PFAS in our environment and preventing future contamination is critical to the health and well-being of Maine people, farms, and wildlife.
- To advance **carbon sequestration** and mitigate the impacts of climate change, the budget funds forest carbon mapping. Per a recommendation from a subcommittee of Maine’s Climate Council, this program for small-to-medium size woodland owners in Maine who want to utilize their land for long-term storage of carbon emissions, a process known as carbon sequestration. Forest carbon programs provide financial incentives to preserve

forests, thereby storing carbon emissions. However, today, most existing programs are not accessible or economically feasible for smaller woodland owners. One of the bills I co-sponsored, [examining incentives to encourage farmers to explore soil carbon storage](#), was also passed into law.

- I was delighted to co-sponsor and work hard on behalf of [LD 1659](#) "An Act To Create the Maine Clean Energy and Sustainability Accelerator", which also became law. It **creates a financing vehicle** for the clean energy projects that are crucial to our plan to combat climate change. Accelerator financing (sometimes called a "green bank") fuels job growth, has significant returns on investment, and leverages federal funding, while utilizing targeted investment strategies for maximum impact.
- Maine passed the first in the nation ["Extended Producer Responsibility" bill](#). Currently taxpayers bear 100% of the cost of recycling and disposal, which has been a topic of discussion in Freeport and many other municipalities, leading some to end their recycling programs. The [new bill shifts](#) that responsibility, requiring producers to pay a fee based on the amount of packaging they use. The purpose is to incentivize producers to create packaging that can be easily recycled and contains more recycled content. Those fees go to a statewide stewardship organization, which then reimburses municipalities for costs of recycling that packaging. As the Maine Municipal Association states, "The cost of recycling has skyrocketed, forcing Maine communities to abandon recycling efforts to stem huge price increases that fall on the property taxpayer. EPR for packaging is a step in the right direction by asking producers to be part of the solution." I have had quite a few conversations around this bill with citizens and businesses. Any business making less than \$5M gross revenue is exempt for the first three years, then the threshold drops to \$2M. It also exempts any producer making less than 1 ton of packaging per year and has a tiered flat-fee structure for businesses making up to 15 tons per year that enables them to bypass the fee paperwork should they choose to. Nonprofits and small farmers of perishable food are also exempt.
- There were two bills, including one I sponsored, that dealt with regulation of airboats. Due to a bill that passed in the 129<sup>th</sup> Legislature, this type of watercraft is not currently regulated. The two bills were similar in all but two respects. LD 114, sponsored by Rep. Jay McCreight, proposed establishing maximum decibel levels which were the final ones debated by an Inland Fisheries and Wildlife stakeholder group (which they unfortunately could not reach consensus on after a three-month process.) My bill, LD 89, proposed lower decibel levels based on data collected by the IF&W and DMR departments themselves – standards which were met 90%+ of the time by local airboats. My bill also proposed an assessment of the environmental impact of the airboat noise. You can find the text and testimony on both bills [here](#). LD 114 passed, and will go into effect on October 18, 2021. The work of the IF&W stakeholder group continues, and I continue to engage in the dialogue around this complex issue.

### Economic/Work Force Development and Housing:

- More than 500,000 Mainers who worked through the pandemic will receive a **one-time, up to \$300 payment** recognizing the hazardous conditions they worked through. Eligible workers include those who earn \$75,000 or less as individuals or \$150,000 or less as joint filers.
- The budget supports Maine's workforce training through **Career and Technical Education** (CTE). Maine has not updated equipment and necessary capital improvements since 1997. The budget will support these improvements at CTE schools across Maine, so students have access to the technology and tools they need to train for today's economy.
- There are several **childcare initiatives** included in the supplemental budget, the ARPA funding plan, and individual bills to expand programs, support and expand the childcare workforce, and expand family leave options (including extending access to leave to grandparents.)
- [LD 953](#) expanded the eligible uses for a TIF district to affordable housing and homelessness services. This is a landmark change in the allowable use of funds for a TIF that extends even to housing and services which are not directly located in the TIF district.
- I was part of the bipartisan Legislative Housing Group which collaborated on over 40 bills to support affordable housing in Maine. Significant federal funding has been allocated to Maine Housing to build more affordable units, support first-time homeowners, and provide municipalities with best practices to develop affordable housing. I have also worked with a statewide coalition of over 50 organizations to sponsor [LD 1694](#), which would establish the Maine Redevelopment Authority. This establishes a state land bank (a structure which is in 18 other states) to help municipalities rehabilitate tax-acquired or compromised properties that cannot be redeveloped in any other way. These properties often are turned into affordable housing or green spaces. This fall I am working with the Mills Administration and our federal delegation to make final adjustments to the bill, which will come back to the Legislature in January.

There are so many other bills I can mention that have a municipal impact, such as improved voting accessibility through the expansion of absentee voting and the creation of online voter registration. Click [here](#) to see the full supplemental budget bill, and [here](#) for the American Rescue plan proposal (the majority report passed the Legislature), if you would like further details on the many investments made in education, healthcare, economic development, and the environment in these packages. I have also worked with Council leadership and Town staff regarding ARPA funding from the Cumberland County, and am available to continue to assist as needed.

I am honored to represent Freeport in the legislature, and appreciate the strong relationship and dialogue I have with the Town Council, the Town Staff, and our citizens. I am always happy to provide more information or answer questions, and appreciate the opportunity to do so.

With gratitude,

*Melanie*

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