

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – WASHINGTON & AROOSTOOK COUNTIES

Introduction, Overview and Governance



Introduction

In 2011, the Washington-Aroostook region received a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to prepare a regional plan for sustainable development that could improve the economic, environmental and social conditions of the region.

The lead agency for the grant is the Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC). NMDC worked with the Washington County Council of Governments (WCCOG), the Sunrise County Economic Council (SEEC) and the Aroostook/Washington Counties Workforce Investment Board (AWWIB) to prepare a multi-faceted plan for sustainable regional development. Additional support came from the two Community Action Program agencies, the Washington-Hancock Community Agency (WHCA) and the Aroostook County Action Program (ACAP), and Four Directions Development Corporation.

The name **GROWashington-Aroostook (GROW-A)** describes the goal of the initiative: to provide direction, action and critical infrastructure to create new jobs and better living conditions in the region.

The region encompasses Aroostook and Washington counties, the two easternmost counties in Maine, encompassing 9,234 square miles and a population of 104,726 individuals. Communities are small and tight-knit. Presque Isle (pop. 9,692) in Aroostook and Calais (pop. 3,123) in Washington are the largest municipalities. Most towns in the region have fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, many less than 500.

The landscape stretches from the ocean and fishing communities in Washington County, through agricultural lands in both counties, to the largest privately held forest lands east of the Mississippi in northwest Aroostook. Fishing, agriculture and forestry operations comprise the historical economic backbone of the region; requiring hard physical labor to make a living from the sea, land and forest. In recent years, healthcare and education offer the strongest employment opportunities for area residents.

GROWashington-Aroostook (GROW-A) Work Program

Driven by the extensive requirements of the Sustainable Communities grant program as well as the needs of the region our work plan was ambitious. It includes the economic,

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social, and environmental fabric of this region. To that end, the work was divided into the following components:

- Growth Management Law Change
- Transportation and Economic Development
- Transportation and Housing
- Brownfields and Economic Renewal
- Economic Development
- Climate Change and Infrastructure Resilience
- Communications and Electric Utility Infrastructure
- Renewable Energy and Related Training
- Workforce Training
- Water Infrastructure Investment
- Healthy Communities
- Sustainable Housing

To ensure that the work is accessible to the communities and businesses in the region we created a web site (www.gro-wa.org) where work products are posted. Executive Summaries, available at (<http://gro-wa.org/executive-summaries>), guide the reader to the resource and regional planning elements that are posted on web pages for each subject.

Work products vary according to subject. Some are traditional planning documents like the Regional Plan for Sustainable Housing in Washington County (www.gro-wa.org/regional-plan-for-sustainable-housing); some are detailed spreadsheets to assist in prioritizing Water Infrastructure investments (<http://gro-wa.org/water-systems-assessment>); and some provide regional inventory and regional policy templates for municipalities to use and modify to their specific circumstances as they meet the requirements of Maine’s Growth Management Act (<http://gro-wa.org/regional-coordination-templates>). There are innovative products that provide on-line GIS mapping capability that is customized to each municipality (<http://gro-wa.org/helping-washington-county-plan-its-future>), storm surge scenarios to help communities prepare for the impacts of climate change (<http://gro-wa.org/washington-county-climate-change-response>), or connection to the vibrant and growing local food movement in Maine (<http://gro-wa.org/wcfood>).

Connection and Sustainability

Developing connections among local and regional service organizations, municipalities and educational resources is challenging in a 9000 square mile region. While some relationships exist by necessity to accomplish work, many are relatively narrow and



focused on specific activities or projects. The GROW-A planning initiative prompted discussion at a scale that seldom, if ever, takes place.

Several organizations already operate across this geographic area. Two examples are the Aroostook-Washington Counties Workforce Investment Board (one of the partners) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA); and in 2011, the Economic Development Administration expanded the Aroostook Economic Development District (EDD) to include Aroostook and Washington counties. The new EDD was a motivating factor in applying for this grant because a natural consequence of performing the work in the GROW-A plan would create a closer affiliation and better understanding between NMDC and the regional/municipal organizations involved. Municipalities and organizations will continue to operate in smaller spheres than the two-county region, but the GROW-A collaboration brought a deeper understanding of the respective capacity and scope of sister institutions that will enable joint participation in future projects. Additionally, the personal inter-institutional relationships between staff members will serve to foster future collaboration.

Governance and Implementation

As the GROW-A work plan items move into the implementation phase, there will be heavy reliance on continuing economic development, transportation and workforce development efforts, guided by NMDC, WCCOG, SCEC and the AWWIB.

In the case of NMDC, the yearly updating of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is accomplished by a business-led process known as Mobilize Maine. Mobilize Maine has a standing leadership team consisting of the largest employers in the region that serve to establish measureable regional goals and to guide more refined sector focus to develop initiatives to accomplish those goals. This asset-based process has been in place in Aroostook for more than five years and will be reinvigorated in Washington County with participation by WCCOG and SCEC.

The AWWIB, on the other hand, has developed a Five Year Strategic Plan for workforce development, crafted with consideration of the CEDS and with strategic investment priorities established in several GROW-A work products. To create an even closer tie between economic development and workforce planning, a smaller working group of the AWWIB Board is the designated review committee that provides feedback and refinement to the annual CEDS update.

Regional transportation planning and investment is a significant economic development link between the two counties. Maintenance of the Route 1 corridor is important to both



counties and expansion of the Port of Eastport has implications for products and trade throughout the region. To that end, NMDC and WCCOG staff will convene a quarterly conference call to discuss initiatives in their respective counties with an eye toward participation and mutual assistance.

Good strategic planning for economic, transportation and workforce development is the foundation for the development of initiatives that will result in job creation and economic expansion; and we recognize the essential value of having regional businesses guiding that planning process. Of equal importance is ongoing consultation between organizational staff responsible for implementing strategies to reach the goals established in these plans.

Alignment with Local, State and Federal Resources

As directed by the original grant funds for the GROW-A project, we have used federal dollars to design, direct and implement *regional priorities*. GROW-A Grant funds from the Office of Economic Resilience (formerly the Office of Sustainable Communities) at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) are new and unique in federal programs in that they derive from a deliberate partnership among five federal agencies (HUD, Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Department of Agriculture).

Not only was the Office of Economic Resilience formed to assist with creating the links (or “breaking down the silos”) across federal agencies; it also assumed that regional sustainable development efforts will be unique across the country and should be driven by local/regional priorities. The GROW-A work products reflect this emphasis on regionally defined solutions and cross-discipline, inter-agency, multi-level integration of our most important recommendations.

Accordingly the GROW-A work products seek to align the regional priorities of our very rural, natural-resource-based, low-moderate income population with local, state and federal resources. These include the:

- EDA-required Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS),
- Aroostook-Washington Workforce Investment Board (AWWIB) Five Year Strategic Plan,
- Fair Housing Equity Assessment for both counties and the Regional Housing Plans unique to each
- Brownfields Assessment and Clean-up programs covering both counties,
- Climate Vulnerability Assessment for Washington County



- Decentralized Wastewater Systems On-Line Resource Manual for Municipal Officials and Developers
- First of its kind Water Systems Assessment for small rural water utilities
- Strategic Transportation Investments
- On-line access to GIS mapping tailored to very many, very small communities who could not otherwise afford to obtain or use it
- Rural Workforce Transportation Options
- Local and Regional Food Systems support.

Conclusion

The GROWashington-Aroostook regional planning initiative is an ambitious multi-faceted body of work that provides direction to our very large two-county region in economic development; workforce development; transportation, water, and telecommunications infrastructure; sustainable housing; and healthy communities, particularly local and regional food systems. It provides traditional planning inventories, analyses and policy recommendations. GROW-A also many new and innovative tools that are customized and customizable to the needs of our local municipalities including multiple on-line GIS mapping tools, templates for regional inventory and policy, and model ordinances.

The GROW-A plan products also “live on-line”. As a result they are accessible and offer educational and customizable tools at the convenience of the user. Finally the partner agencies are making a long-term commitment to keeping the material up to date, particularly the GIS mapping data. As the work teams implement the recommendations of the various GROW-A products we will rely on the relationships built during GROW-A plan development. These include personal and electronic relationships among new federal partners, realigned state agencies, and multiple private and non-profit partners within the two county region.