



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AROOSTOOK**

### **Transportation and Housing**

#### **Introductory Section**

Aroostook is Maine's largest county, with an area (6,672 square miles) larger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. It is also the state's northernmost county, sharing a border to the east, west and north with Canada. Northern Maine Development Commission's (NMDC) service area includes 71 communities and 137 unorganized townships throughout Aroostook, parts of Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Washington counties. Many communities in Aroostook County fall within the designated low-to-moderate income (LMI) category as defined by U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines.

Aroostook County, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, has a population of 71,870. Approximately 55% of the county's residents live in service center communities with the remaining 45% residing in smaller, rural communities. Residents of the most remote communities along the Allagash River (and north) must travel 1 – 1¼ hours to attend doctor appointments, purchase groceries, and obtain other necessary goods and services.. Similarly, residents of Reed Plantation and other southern Aroostook communities must travel 1½ hours to the nearest service center community of Houlton.

Housing is interconnected with other critical issues, such as transportation, economic development, environmental protection, and social services. Housing pressures affect virtually every citizen, including middle-income families struggling to purchase homes, lower-income residents facing increasing housing cost burdens, and seniors, who are often unable to remain in their homes as they age because of a lack of support services. This work component examines the relationship between how communities are built and the cost for residents to live in them. .



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### Findings

Approximately 70% of the county's housing units are owner-occupied and 30% are renter-occupied. Based on 2010 U.S. Census data, a majority of housing units in Aroostook County are also one-unit, detached dwellings; more than 27% of these units were constructed prior to 1939. Not surprisingly, the cost of maintaining a safe, sanitary and decent home exceeds the monthly income of most LMI homeowners.

More than 20% of owner-occupied households pay 35% or more of their income toward monthly housing costs, while an even higher percentage of renters (34%) do so. The standard measure of affordability for housing is 30% or less of household income. Three out of four communities are considered "affordable" under the traditional housing-only standard, but only three out of 10 are considered affordable when transportation costs are figured in.

Home prices and rents have increased much faster than incomes since 2000. There has been a 69% increase in median home prices since 2000; median income has only increased by 20%. A two-bedroom rent increased by 18% since 2000 while income increased by 10%. In 2010, the Maine State Housing Authority reported that Aroostook and Washington counties show an affordability index greater than 1.0, which means that homeownership and rental housing is affordable. What is not considered is the transportation costs in Aroostook County. Housing and transportation represent the largest expenses in most household budgets, and are driven in large part by location and community characteristics. The combined housing and transportation affordability standard, developed by the Center for Neighborhood Technology, is 45% of household income.

The U.S. average commuter time is 25.4 minutes; in Maine that average is 23.0 minutes. Aroostook County's average of 16.5 minutes and Washington County's average of 19.2 minutes may seem much lower than the state and national averages. These lower times for Washington and Aroostook directly relate to the much lower traffic volume on the roads resulting in practically non-existent traffic congestion issues.

While there is no public transit service in the region, the Aroostook Regional Transportation System (ARTS) provides general public transportation throughout Aroostook County. Services are provided from each town at least once a week to the nearest commercial center. Services are available to all members of the general public from the outlying towns to the commercial center and pick-up services are available in town to the elderly and handicapped.



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### Analysis and Basic Conclusions

While the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) has rated roads in the region as being in fair to excellent condition, major roadwork is often delayed due to state and local budgetary constraints, resulting in the deterioration of the most frequently traveled roadways. In Aroostook County, the weight and size of tractor-trailer trucks, farming equipment and public works machinery only adds to the stress on roadways. Overweight vehicles break up road surfaces and the lack of paved surfaces on some local roads creates dust and safety problems.

Long commute times and travel to and from service center communities has a major impact on the operation and maintenance of vehicles. Greater miles traveled not only means more frequent fueling (at higher average costs than other regions of Maine), but also means higher repair and maintenance costs. Transportation costs include the cost of auto ownership, insurance, maintenance, and gas.

Housing costs for renters include rent and utilities. For homeowners, housing costs include mortgage payments, property taxes, home insurance, utilities, and payments for home equity loans.

The Center for Neighborhood Technology's Housing and Transportation (H + T) affordability index ([www.htaindex.cnt.org](http://www.htaindex.cnt.org)) is an innovative tool that measures the true affordability of housing based on its location in relation to transportation costs. The tool could be utilized in municipal comprehensive planning and by prospective homebuyers to help them understand and better control transportation costs when deciding where to live.

Using the on-line software, someone living in Allagash will spend \$1,029 per month on transportation costs alone, and will have a CO2 emissions impact of 0.9 metric tons/month based on 2007 data. When adjusting the gas price to today's cost, that average increased by 24% to \$1,278 per month. Using the median monthly homeowner cost of \$940/month or \$11,280 per year, and the on-line tool for a half hour commute to any service center community in Aroostook County, the transportation cost would be \$17,448 per year. A one person household earning an annual income of \$45,000 would pay about 64% for housing and transportation costs, far exceeding the standard of 45%.

Nearly 80% of Aroostook County residents drive alone, compared to 8.6% who carpool. Much of this is due to the fact that the county's workforce is employed in jobs that are not conducive to carpooling, such as working in the woods. Also, the ARTS transportation service does not meet the demands of persons who must attend medical appointments, and therefore they must travel to and from appointments individually.



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### Suggested Actions

Public transportation needs to be increased and public awareness of available services needs to become a priority. ARTS should work with the region's largest employers to develop schedules that accommodate employees living in outlying communities. At a minimum, ARTS should develop centralized drop-off and pick-up locations in the region's service centers and along transportation corridors. The development of "Park-and-Ride" lots should also be considered.

MaineCare's broker/provider system needs to be improved to ensure that clients are able to attend non-emergency medical appointments. The broker needs to have a comprehensive understanding of the Aroostook County region and be able to coordinate transportation services in a timely and effective manner.

Additional areas of focus:

- Increase demand and use of public transit through better marketing of the services available in the region.
- Provide additional service from small, rural communities to the region's service centers. Current one day a week ARTS bus service is not an adequate transportation option for individuals.
- Obtain funding through the Biennial Operating Plan (MaineDOT) process for capital improvements and infrastructure for ARTS.
- Seek and expand alternative funding opportunities, such as the New Freedom grant, to provide service to non-traditional users of the system.
- Review schedules from service centers to employment centers and determine if van pooling/commuter services can be implemented and/or increased.
- Develop an "information highway" to facilitate services, scheduling, and ride-sharing.

Consumer education programs should be initiated to inform vehicle purchasers of the cost-savings available with ownership of smaller vehicles. Beyond researching prices and options, considerations such as gas mileage, a vehicle's resale value, and its affordability (no more than 20% of net household income), are important.

Homebuyer education programs should include information on location-based costs. Lower tax rates and slightly reduced housing prices in non-service center communities may not make up for the transportation costs related to travel to attend school events, recreational activities, work, or shopping.



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#### **Implementation Already Occurring**

- New Freedom program (MaineDOT) that assists LMI individuals and families getting to appointments.
- GoMaine transportation program that assists employees get to work; similar to RideShare.
- ARTS is currently reviewing its service schedule..
- MaineDOT is looking at alternative funding models for infrastructure upkeep and improvement.
- MaineCare broker/provider transportation system is being revised in this region.



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### Additional resource needs

HUD and the US Department of Transportation housing and transportation affordability index data does not cover Aroostook or Washington counties.

Form coalition to look at expanded regional transportation services and related funding

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Develop education programs about combined costs of housing and transportation to better inform homebuyers on the additional costs of living in smaller communities that do not have services that must be accessed by frequent travel to larger communities.