

Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities: Building Blocks

Technical Assistance Tool: Regional Planning for Small Communities

Caribou and Weston, Maine – February 28-29, 2012

To: Jay Kamm, Senior Planner, Northern Maine Development Commission
From: Roger Millar, Smart Growth America
Date: March 16, 2012
Re: Suggested Next Steps as Outcome of Technical Assistance

1. Key issues addressed during the workshop

Through a HUD Sustainable Community Planning Grant, the Aroostook Washington Economic Development District is embarking on a three-year process to create the Washington-Aroostook Regional Plan for Sustainable Development (WARPSD). Further, through a HUD Community Challenge Grant, the Northern Maine Development Commission will develop five Sustainable Community Plans based on regional employment centers (rather than municipal boundaries), in collaboration with the eleven members of the consortium developing the WARPSD.

An element of this initiative is to take stock of the region's assets – human, natural and capital – and to position the region's economy for a sustainable future. The WARPSD process includes:

- Regional planning elements that seize on the economic opportunity offered by wind and tidal power generation, already underway in our region,
- A modern telecommunications infrastructure,
- Initiatives to significantly reduce the regions reliance on fossil fuels,
- Building on the energy plans being prepared through funds already obtained by the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant program of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act,
- Developing transportation alternatives that can be implemented in low density rural areas,
- Coordinating and capitalizing on nature-based tourism and scenic byway initiatives,
- Developing affordable housing near centers of employment,
- Building on active and successful Brownfields assessment initiatives region-wide,
- Leveraging the development of a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy in a new Economic Development District now aligned with a common Workforce Investment Board,
- Leveraging the funds and expertise of Maine state planning and transportation agencies to improve water infrastructure, transportation planning and statutory changes to allow adoption of the WARPSD,
- State of the art GIS modeling in cooperation with universities in our region to assist with visioning and scenario planning that will allow planners and the public to discuss alternative futures.

This ambitious regional planning effort has several challenges:

- The key partners in the Consortium – the Northern Maine Development Commission (located in Aroostook County), the Washington County Council of Governments, and the Sunrise County Economic Council (located in Washington County) – have little history working together as a region.
- The HUD project engages an even broader consortium of regional and state agencies under the leadership of these three organizations.
- The region has challenges:
 - It is located far from the center of the state's economy
 - The region's population has been in decline for decades
 - The region has the oldest population in a state with the oldest population in the country
 - The region's communities and planning partners are spread across a broad, sparsely populated area
- The region also has assets:
 - An established tourism and recreation center
 - Abundant natural resources
 - A unique and developing relationship between coastal/non-coastal northern Maine

2. Targeted policies/ideas/strategies discussed during the workshops

- Create a vision for the region
 - Having regional goals would be precedent setting
 - The participants felt comfortable with the definition of their region, primarily because it is defined by the HUD Grant
 - State boundaries such as tourism districts, workforce area districts and economic development areas do not currently match up
 - Turnover at the state level (both executive and legislative) may have resulted in state agency members the consortium, such as Maine DOT, being unaware of this planning project
- Reach out to and effectively engage stakeholders
 - Citizens
 - Business and development interests
 - Consortium members
 - Local and County elected officials
 - State Legislators
 - Congressional delegation
- Improve coordination/grant administration with HUD
 - Difficult getting under way
 - Procedures and protocols appear to be in place

- Incorporate best practices for rural and regional planning
 - Regional Planning for a Sustainable America, edited by Carlton Montgomery (www.regionalplans.org)
 - Missoula UFDA project (www.co.missoula.mt.us/opgweb/UrbanInitiative/index.htm#UFDA)
 - McCall Regional cooperation, competitiveness, affordable housing incentives in zoning ordinance (www.sterlingcodifiers.com/codebook/index.php?book_id=497)
- Address rural transportation issues
 - Walkability:
 - Town centers are an asset and should be walkable
 - Make walking pleasurable instead of life threatening
 - Invest in sidewalks where appropriate, including gaps in existing networks
 - Invest in getting the snow off of sidewalks
 - Install pedestrian crossings where there are long distances between intersections
 - Bus:
 - Lots of interest in rural transit
 - Rural circulator paid for with mix of federal, state, local and private money
 - Key to success is a good relationship with state DOT
 - Carpool matching programs
 - Address social issues around rural transit
 - Affordability, stigma
 - Provide dignity to waiting for bus
 - partner with private sector to make it a nice place to wait
 - provide information about routes and schedules
 - Is transit in northern Maine an alternative for everybody or a social service for those who have no other choice?
- Communications and effective citizen engagement
 - PLAN: Prepare, Learn, Align, Negotiate
 - Develop working groups, work regularly, give them resources (Outreach can be offering help not just asking for help), have one point of contact
 - Positive messaging and being proactive
 - Social media is a part of process
- Conduct a review of existing local policies and local policy documents
 - People in the community remember there has been planning already
 - Leverage these efforts and the civic investment involved

BRIEF REVIEW OF EXISTING POLICIES IN TWO COUNTY REGION			
TOPIC ISSUE	Aroostook	Washington	NOTES
Transportation	Yes	Yes	Transit -, trails +
Tourism	Yes	Yes	No connection
Economic development	Yes	Yes	Mobilize Maine in WC; Change in CEDS process
Housing	No	Old/partial	Opportunity
Energy	Renewable strategy	Strategy developing	Opportunity / interest
Utilities / Telecomm	?	Telecomm	Opportunity: fiber to home
Solid waste	?	?	
Water	No	No	Part of plan
Health	Yes	Yes	Need input from healthcare community
Food security	active network	active network	Opportunity; RFP at state
Workforce development	Yes	Yes	Opportunity
Education	Yes	Yes	Average school district / higher education
Land use	No	No	Mapping / voluntary
Climate change	No	No	Adaptation

3. Actions to address policies/strategies

At the end of the workshop, “next steps” were proposed as a roadmap for initiating the regional planning process.

- Organize the project team for efficient and effective project management, resource utilization, and documentation.

- Refine the project workflow and update and refine the schedule
- Resolve workload sharing to ensure that consortium members are receiving grant resources commensurate with their capacities and project responsibilities
- Determine if contract professional services are needed and initiate procurement process
- Establish a documentation protocol and identify a document repository
- Re-engage consortium members who have not been involved in project start up.
 - Have all consortium members sign the project agreement
 - Schedule a kickoff meeting for consortium members and other partners
- Develop and implement a Communications Plan to engage elected officials, staff, business and civic organizations, the public and the media in a timely and appropriate manner.
 - Develop key messages and identify key messengers
 - Train project staff on the communications plan
 - Develop a project website

4. Time frame for accomplishing actions

The consortium management team plans to use the suggested next steps to kick off the project at a meeting scheduled prior to the release of this memorandum. As Smart Growth America's agreement with the Northern Maine Development Commission includes a requirement for progress reports immediately after delivery of this memorandum, six months after the workshop, and one year after the workshop, we anticipate the following time frame:

- The first memorandum from NMDC will report on the consortium's initial efforts to implement the suggested next steps
- The six-month memorandum will report on successful project organization, consortium engagement, and the adoption of a communications plan
- The one-year memorandum will report on project progress and course correction as needed

