

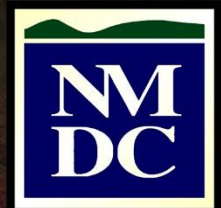
Aroostook/Washington

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2024-2028



EDA

U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION



Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC) plays a crucial role in the economic development of Aroostook and Washington counties. The Aroostook Washington Economic Development District (AWEDD) is characterized by abundant natural resources, including vast forests, fertile agricultural land, and rich marine waters.



Northern
Maine
Development
Commission

The pristine outdoor environment contributes to the high quality of life for residents who call these counties home.

Within this region, nationally award-winning education and healthcare institutions thrive, enhancing the well-being of the local population. Additionally, major employers recognize the importance of a dedicated workforce and foster a culture of entrepreneurship.

Despite its positive attributes, the Aroostook and Washington counties region faces significant challenges. An aging demographic, consistent population out-migration, global market pressures on traditional industries, high poverty rates, and decades of economic stagnation all contribute to the area's vulnerability.

NMDC, as the federally designated planning and economic development organization for the AWEDD, spearheads various programs to address these forces. One such initiative is the creation of a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), as directed by the U.S. Economic Development Administration. Collaborating with private-sector partners—including the Aroostook Partnership (representing more than 80 businesses), University of Maine at Presque Isle, University of Maine at Fort Kent, Northern Maine Community College, Husson University, and organizations in Washington County, such as Sunrise County Economic Council, Washington County Community College and the University of Maine at Machias, NMDC aims to drive sustainable economic growth.

Through interviews with business leaders in both counties, surveys, and data collection efforts, this document reflects a collective commitment to fostering prosperity in this vital region.

Much has changed in the region over the past five years, including a worldwide pandemic, lower labor force participation rates, and challenges in workforce housing, but this document looks to a brighter economic future with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.

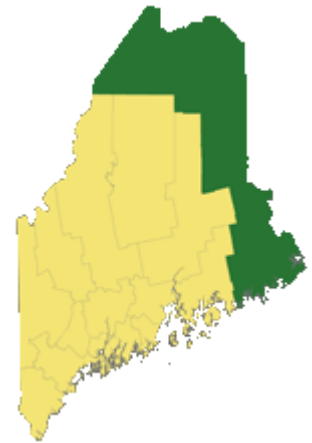
AWEDD CEDS PREPARED BY STAFF AT NORTHERN MAINE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

ROBERT P. CLARK

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Summary Background

Aroostook Washington Economic Development District (AWEDD) has great potential to leverage its natural resource base and environment, its hardworking people, its proximity to Canada and Europe, and its inherent economic resiliency. Those that live here are individuals and families that have become “survivors” – doing whatever is necessary to secure adequate food, shelter and clothing in a very rural location with an extreme winter climate. However, mere survival is not good enough and regional leaders are committed to a transformation that will reverse the economic and social decline of the past four decades.



Although the region experienced some small population increases during the pandemic, the systemic loss of residents hinders economic progress. The tables below, with data from the 2020 U.S. Census, illustrate that population decline.

Population by Age, Aroostook County

Age	2016	2020	Change	% Change
Under 5	3,303	3,313	10	0%
5-9	3,579	3,437	(142)	-4%
10-14	3,638	3,307	(331)	-9%
15-19	4,261	3,773	(488)	-11%
20-24	3,766	3,533	(233)	-6%
25-34	6,801	6,713	(88)	-1%
35-44	7,581	7,021	(560)	-7%
45-54	10,370	8,973	(1,397)	-13%
55-59	6,010	5,713	(297)	-5%
60-64	5,320	5,395	75	1%
65-74	8,206	9,233	1,027	13%
75-84	4,772	4,539	(233)	-5%
85+	1,798	2,481	683	38%
Total	69,405	67,431	(1,974)	-3%
Under 18	NA	12,380	NA	NA
16+	NA	56,773	NA	NA
18+	56,315	55,051	(1,264)	-2%
21+	53,676	52,833	(843)	-2%
62+	17,822	19,412	1,590	9%
65+	14,776	16,253	1,477	10%

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Population by Age, Washington County

Age	2016	2020	Change	% Change
Under 5	1,538	1,513	(25)	-2%
5-9	1,717	1,563	(154)	-9%
10-14	1,739	1,833	94	5%
15-19	1,819	1,763	(56)	-3%
20-24	1,655	1,592	(63)	-4%
25-34	3,100	2,977	(123)	-4%
35-44	3,377	3,215	(162)	-5%
45-54	4,612	3,945	(667)	-14%
55-59	2,600	2,444	(156)	-6%
60-64	2,781	2,838	57	2%
65-74	4,102	4,635	533	13%
75-84	2,090	2,243	153	7%
85+	795	817	22	3%
Total	31,925	31,378	(547)	-2%
Under 18	NA	5,994	NA	NA
16+	NA	26,151	NA	NA
18+	25,839	25,384	(455)	-2%
21+	24,711	24,293	(418)	-2%
62+	8,762	9,304	542	6%
65+	6,987	7,695	708	10%

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Other key indicators for the region are below. (Of note, the associate degree percentage is that of the bachelors and associate combined.)

Aroostook County Summary Indicators				
Labor Force & Economy				
	2016	2020	Change	% Change
Population	69,405	67,431	-1,974	-3%
Labor Force Participation Rate	56.3%	54.1%	-2.20%	-
Bachelor's Degrees (25 & older)	18.1%	19.8%	1.7%	-
Associate Degrees (25 & older)	28.1%	31.8%	3.7%	-
GDP	\$2,267,606,000	\$2,360,223,000	\$92,617,000	4.1%
Historic Employment				
	2017	2021	Change	% Change
Total Employment	31,106	29,006	(2,100)	-6.8%
Projected Employment				
	2021	2025	Change	% Change
Total Employment	29,006	27,815	(1,191)	-4.1%
Sources: ACS 5-Year Summary (labor force data), BEA (GDP), Emsi (historic and projected employment)				
Washington County				
Labor Force & Economy				
	2016	2020	Change	% Change
Population	31,925	31,378	-547	-2%
Labor Force Participation Rate	53.4%	52.6%	-0.80%	-
Bachelor's Degrees (25 & older)	20.1%	23.8%	3.7%	-
Associate Degrees (25 & older)	29.1%	32.7%	3.6%	-
GDP	\$999,986,000	\$1,029,367,000	\$29,381,000	2.9%
Historic Employment				
	2017	2021	Change	% Change
Total Employment	13,332	12,991	(341)	-2.6%
Projected Employment				
	2021	2025	Change	% Change
Total Employment	12,991	12,732	(259)	-2.0%
Sources: ACS 5-Year Summary (labor force data), BEA (GDP), Emsi (historic and projected employment)				
Maine				
Labor Force & Economy				
	2016	2020	Change	% Change
Population	1,329,923	1,340,825	10,902	1%
Labor Force Participation Rate	63.2%	63.0%	-0.20%	-
Bachelor's Degrees (25 & older)	29.3%	32.5%	3.2%	-
Associate Degrees (25 & older)	39.0%	42.7%	3.7%	-
GDP	\$55,565,400,000	\$58,757,300,000	\$3,191,900,000	5.7%
Historic Employment				
	2017	2021	Change	% Change
Total Employment	704,283	702,324	(1,959)	-0.3%
Projected Employment				
	2021	2025	Change	% Change
Total Employment	702,324	705,823	3,499	0.5%
Sources: ACS 5-Year Summary (labor force data), BEA (GDP), Emsi (historic and projected employment)				

A detailed look at the labor force participation rate by age group is below.

Labor Force Participation Rate by Age, Aroostook County				Labor Force Participation Rate by Age, Washington County			
Age	2016	2020	Change	Age	2016	2020	Change
16-19	47.7%	43.9%	-3.8%	16-19	42.5%	40.6%	-1.9%
20-24	79.5%	76.0%	-3.5%	20-24	73.7%	74.2%	0.5%
25-29	75.3%	82.3%	7.0%	25-29	74.6%	79.8%	5.2%
30-34	78.7%	79.1%	0.4%	30-34	74.9%	72.3%	-2.6%
35-44	79.7%	79.9%	0.2%	35-44	74.0%	73.5%	-0.5%
45-54	75.0%	76.6%	1.6%	45-54	75.0%	72.6%	-2.4%
55-59	69.4%	68.4%	-1.0%	55-59	64.0%	66.2%	2.2%
60-64	51.3%	49.3%	-2.0%	60-64	43.7%	50.1%	6.4%
65-74	21.8%	20.6%	-1.2%	65-74	24.6%	26.0%	1.4%
75+	4.9%	3.4%	-1.5%	75+	6.5%	8.0%	1.5%
Total	56.3%	54.1%	-2.2%	Total	53.4%	52.6%	-0.8%
Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates				Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates			

Entrepreneurship continues to grow in the AWEDD, with sole proprietors increasing, but the number of establishments with 2-9 jobs is on the decline across the region.

Establishments by Size, Aroostook County				Establishments by Size, Washington County			
Size	2017	2021	Change	Size	2017	2021	Change
Sole proprietors	16.42%	21.41%	4.99%	Sole proprietors	17.42%	20.19%	2.77%
2-9 Jobs	64.51%	59.38%	-5.13%	2-9 Jobs	65.83%	63.77%	-2.06%
10-99 Jobs	17.78%	18.01%	0.23%	10-99 Jobs	15.66%	14.98%	-0.68%
100-499 Jobs	1.21%	1.09%	-0.12%	100-499 Jobs	1.08%	1.05%	-0.03%
500+ Jobs	0.08%	0.10%	0.02%	500+ Jobs	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Total Establishments (approx.)	3,800	3,800	0	Total Establishments (approx.)	1,800	1,900	100
Source: YourEconomy				Source: YourEconomy			

For more data and other resources go to
<https://www.nmdc.org/ceds-extras/>

Who We Are

The racial and ethnic composition of Aroostook County as of 2020 was 94.5% white, 2% American Indian and Alaska Native, 1.6% Hispanic or Latino, 1.2% black or African American, 0.6% Asian, 0.1% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander and 1.6% two or more races.

Aroostook County is home to two federally recognized tribes, the Houlton Band of Maliseets and Mi'kmaq Nation.



Mi'kmaq
Nation



HOULTON BAND OF MALISEET INDIANS

Aroostook County also has a significant Amish community, as well as a Swedish Colony, and the Acadian Culture in the St. John Valley.

The population of Washington County is predominantly white (91.2%), followed by American Indian and Alaska Native (5.3%), two or more races (2.3%), Hispanic or Latino (3%), black or African American (0.7%), Asian (0.5%), and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (Z).

Washington County is home to the Passamaquoddy Indian Township Reservation. This reservation belongs to the Passamaquoddy tribe and is one of the two Indian reservations recognized by the federal government in Washington County.



The median household income in Aroostook County is approximately \$51,359 and is \$51,669 in Washington County, while the median household income for the entire state of Maine stands at \$69,543. Comparatively, the median household income in the United States is \$74,755¹. It's important to note that AWEDD's income is lower than both the state and national averages.

While the AWEDD has its unique character and charm, economic disparities exist, and efforts are continually made to improve the well-being of its residents.

¹ Data from 2022 American Community Survey, U.S Census Bureau.

Infrastructure

While roads and bridges continue to be the region's most important transportation infrastructure and the backbone to economic development and retention in the region, rail is becoming more important to many of the region's shippers. The region's transportation system is extensive, but not diverse, and the region's roads are being asked to serve two conflicting services. The first is to be the major north-south or east-west corridor that is used by the heavy haul trucking industry to access mills and manufactures throughout the region. They are used to ship products to markets in southern New England and the mid-Atlantic states.



The second is to serve as “Main Street” in many communities, large and small. Examples include US Route 1 in Presque Isle, Van Buren, Madawaska, Fort Kent, Calais, and Machias. These municipalities, and others, recognize the difficulty of managing the two very different types of traffic flow, heavy haul through traffic and the day-to-day local passenger traffic. In the cases mentioned above, each of these municipalities have entered

partnerships (Planning Partnership Programs) with the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) to begin planning efforts in their downtown with the intention of bringing significant federal funding to implement projects identified in the plans.

With increasing costs and supply chain issues, municipalities are having a difficult time with road maintenance and stream crossing replacements. Road reconstruction project costs are normally well above what a community can afford or even finance and stream crossings that enhance fish passage usually cost in excess of \$300,000. Many small rural communities contain one road (Ludlow and Chapman for example) and have identified needed projects that engineers have estimated to cost between \$500,000 and \$1 million dollars, well out of the means of these communities. Additional federal funding is needed to assist rural communities with these types of projects.

The region's bridges are aging. Many were constructed in the first half of the last century, and many are reaching the end of their service lives. Through proactive bridge maintenance activities and capital investments, MaineDOT's strategic objective is to achieve an average replacement age of 80 years. However, based on current funding and rate of replacement, bridges will need to last an average of 180 years. Though age is not the only predictor, this poses a challenge which, if not addressed strategically over the next several decades,

would require future generations to fund many bridges at once, or be faced with numerous postings and long detour routes.

Parts of US Route 1, State Route 11, State Routes 161, 162, 187, and 191 serves as National Scenic Byways (St. John Valley/Fish River National Scenic Byway, Katahdin Woods and Waters National Scenic Byway, and Bold Coast National Scenic Byway), state scenic byways (Million Dollar View), and federally designated bicycle routes (USBR 501 and 1[Bold Coast]) with the potential of bringing tourists to the region. Major problems associated with these byways and bike route is the lack of large gateway signs informing the visitor that they are on the National Byway and informational kiosks in the larger communities or hubs assisting the visitor with wayfinding. The Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) has placed small signs at the beginning of the byway which can be easily missed by the traveling public and informational kiosk at key locations help those unfamiliar with the byway “find their way” to resources.

Rail service has improved in the region since the State of Maine purchased the MMA line and made significant capital improvements to the main line infrastructure. As a result, past complaints of rail cars only being able to travel up to 10mph have been eliminated with the installation of a higher class of line and ballast services. Additionally, the NMR company has been providing a higher level of service to the region’s largest manufacturers and rail usage has increased substantially in the past year. However smaller manufactures are still finding rail difficult to utilize as NMR cannot accommodate the smaller number of loads from these industries. In many cases, the lack of maintained sidings has become a hinderance to the use of rail.

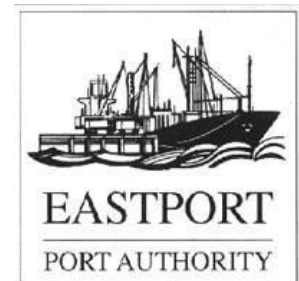


There is no true public transit system in either Aroostook or Washington Counties. Aroostook Regional Transportation Systems (ARTS) serves all communities in Aroostook County and Danforth in Washington County at least one time per week but it heavily reliant on MaineCare and Medicare clients for its ridership. As a result, local schedules typically accommodate those clients for their non-emergency trips to medical or other appointments and less so for the general public to access employment centers. Additionally, there are no organized car and van pooling projects on-going. There is an increasing need to develop workforce transportation programs from the region’s service center communities to industrial hubs in the Ashland/Portage Lake area, Easton, Madawaska, and New Limerick. Downeast Community Partners offers similar services in Washington County.

There are four (4) regional airports in Aroostook County, located in Houlton, Presque Isle, Caribou, and Frenchville. Northern Maine Regional Airport (Presque Isle) is the largest

airport in the region and now offers 12 regularly scheduled flights on regional jets to Newark, New Jersey and Washington DC. The three remaining airports are general aviation airports and provide locations for general aviation, medical flights, and cargo. There are no regularly scheduled passenger flights from these airports. Likewise, there are five (5) regional airports in Washington County; Eastport, Princeton, Machias, and Cutler. None of these airports offer regularly scheduled air service at the present time. Eastport is looking into developing some form of passenger air service, possibly to the Portland area.

The Eastport Port Authority oversees two facilities in Eastport, Eastport Breakwater and Estes Head. The Eastport Breakwater (draft of over 40 feet) was rebuilt and expanded in 2017. Located in Eastport's downtown, the Breakwater serves as a centerpiece for the area's commercial fishing and tourism economy. The Breakwater serves as the perfect pier for welcoming the growing cruise ship industry on the coast of Maine.



Estes Head Cargo is the deepest natural seaport in the continental United States. The facility is the main cargo port and contains a 635-foot pier, 900-foot tie off dolphins, 133,000 square feet of dry warehouse storage, state of the art bulk materials handling system, and zero air draft restrictions. Estes Head can accommodate most cargo vessels on the ocean today. Recent improvements in road infrastructure have greatly improved truck access to the facility. Port Authority officials are seeking ways to improve vehicle access to Eastport and working to determine if a new bridge from Carlow Island to Pembroke is feasible to shorten travel time to the port.

In order to address climate change issues, the State has been advocating for the installation of electric vehicle (EV) chargers, Level 2 and DC Fast Chargers. Route 1 from Calais to Fort Kent and Route 11 in the Ashland area have been identified as priority corridors in the region. At the time of the writing of this section, Aroostook and Washington Counties are ringed by a vast network of EV chargers in New Brunswick. Aroostook County has four (4) Level 2 public chargers and Washington County has two (2). Four (4) DC Fast Chargers are being located in Aroostook and Washington Counties.

Additionally, Maine's Climate Council, in their 2020 Plan [*Maine Won't Wait*](#), calls for the increase production and usage of biofuels and biodiesel especially in heavy duty vehicles. Increased production would greatly benefit both Aroostook and Washington County with our vast natural resource base. Increased production in the region would also benefit the heavy trucking industry through potentially reduced fuel costs.

The water and sewer infrastructure in Aroostook and Washington counties is aging and many communities don't have the tax base for multimillion-dollar upgrades. Although there has been significant federal funding for a limited number of projects in the region, more is needed. It's essential to recognize that maintaining and upgrading water and wastewater systems is vital for the economic and environmental health of communities. These

investments ensure access to clean, safe drinking water and support business and residential growth.

Broadband infrastructure will be addressed in a later section of this document.

Suggested Actions

Roads and Bridges

- Maintain and/or acquire adequate funding to maintain and upgrade existing highway and bridge infrastructure. Utilize transportation bonds as needed.
- Support transportation improvements identified in the Village Partnership plans.
- Support, where appropriate, the Long-Range Transportation Plan.
- Adequately identify heavy haul truck routes in the region. Construct heavy haul freight routes to a higher standard that accommodates this type of traffic.
- Maintain and/or upgrade minor collectors and state aid routes that are utilized to access major manufactures.
- Assist smaller rural communities with road reconstruction and stream crossing projects.
- Develop a gateway signage and information kiosk system on the region's National Scenic Byways, state scenic byway, and federally designated bicycle route. Use transportation signage that makes motorists more aware of the possible presence of bicyclists and pedestrians on the roads.
- Install publicly available electric vehicle charging stations at strategic locations throughout each county to help mitigate "range anxiety."

Rail Service

- Support, where appropriate, the Maine State Rail Plan.
- Continue to utilize the Industrial Rail Access Program (IRAP) program to fund essential projects in the region, especially the upgrade and maintenance of spurs.
- Work with major manufacturers to develop schedules that increase shipments.
- Accommodate the smaller manufacturers that ship fewer loads, whenever feasible.
- Continue to ensure that cross border traffic can flow between Van Buren and New Brunswick.
- Seek the development of public and private financial assistance for system improvements.
- Allow high truck weights to major rail sidings near the Canadian border and develop intermodal/trans-load facilities.

Public Transit Service

- Support, where appropriate, the Maine State Transit Plan.
- Increase demand and use through better marketing of the services available in the region.
- Seek alternative funding opportunities, such as the Workforce Transportation and 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 and improve workforce transportation services from population centers to industrial and economic hubs.

Air Service

- Support, where appropriate, the Maine State Aviation Plan.
- Maintain or develop convenient and affordable inter- and intra-state passenger air service.
- Improve/Implement marketing of the region's cargo, commercial, and passenger air services.
- Apply for funding to upgrade existing airport facilities to include terminals and storage buildings in Eastport and Presque Isle.

Water and Sewer

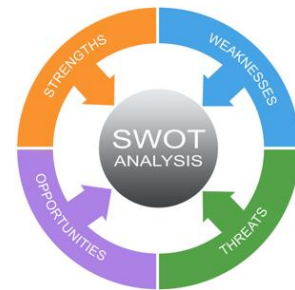
- Invest in modernizing wastewater treatment facilities, pump stations, and other critical components.
- Secure technical assistance funding to work with smaller communities with little to no capacity.



Madawaska — Construction of a new international bridge connecting Madawaska, ME to Edmundston, NB.

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis is a valuable tool for economic development because it provides a comprehensive understanding of a region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. NMDC staff conducted in person and online SWOT exercises to provide a clear picture of where the AWEDD stands and to inform strategic direction.



Strengths

- Natural resources
- Coastline
- Geography close to Canada and Europe
- Loring Commerce Centre
- Bilingual population St. John Valley
- Access to outdoor recreation
- Quality of place
- Low crime
- NMDC, SCEC, Aroostook Partnership
- Colleges/Universities
- Housing affordability

Weaknesses

- High energy costs
- Slow rural broadband rollout
- Outmigration/Declining Workforce
- Low labor force participation rate
- Lower than state average wages
- Distance to large markets
- Lack of rail infrastructure connection to Port of Eastport
- Lack of adequate housing
- Daycare options and costs
- Reliance on lobster industry

Opportunities

- Energy production
- Aerospace industry
- Expanding and diversifying value-added wood products
- Expanding value-added processing of crops and marine resources
- Loring Commerce Centre
- Expanded shipping opportunities at the Port of Eastport (deepest port on the U.S. east coast)
- Growing entrepreneurial opportunities
- Local foods
- Regional tourism efforts
- More remote workers due to the pandemic

Threats

- Workforce/Population decline
- Inflation
- Aging population
- Climate change (rising ocean temps)
- Lack of work ready skills
- Drug abuse
- Business relocation out of region
- Social media negativity

AWEDD Regional Vision

Our region is a place of abundant natural resources that is reflected in the beauty of our landscape and the potential for economic and social prosperity it offers. We will create economic growth by focusing on sectors that best leverage these assets and by working to develop policies that promote private sector investment; while at the same time, retaining the quality of life that makes the region special.

AWEDD Regional Goals

A Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is more than a description of the region accompanied by broad aspirational goals that allow a wide-ranging list of designated “priority” projects to qualify for federal funding sources.

AWEDD, as it has for the past two CEDS, is employing S.M.A.R.T. goals principals for the development of this Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

These principles include the following key elements:

- *Process – Based on Best Practices for Regional Community Economic Development (CED) and Collaboration*
- *Regional Focus – Enables regions to compete against other regional, national and international strategies*
- *Asset-Based – Indigenous assets grow more durable economies*
- *Diversified – Makes for a nimbler and resilient economy*
- *Measurable Strategy – Responsive to trends...relevant to region*
- *Disciplined & Consistent – All ideas are not equal...priorities matter*



The AWEDD CEDS with key strategies and implementable action plans linked to S.M.A.R.T. goals is the basis for a collaborative, region-wide transformation for regional prosperity.

AWEDD	2020 Census Baseline	2022 American Community Survey	2028	Change
Population	98,200	98,602	99,102	500
Labor Participation Rate	53.1%	54.0%	58.0%	4% increase
Per Capita Income (BEA)	\$48,243	\$50,464	\$55,510	10% increase
Bachelor's degrees (25 & older)	20.1%	23.9%	26.0%	2.1% increase
Associate degrees (25 & older)	9.7%	10.1%	12.7%	2.6 % increase
Increase younger population 25-44		20,025	20,325	300

As you can see in the above goals chart, growing the population, especially the younger population, is a key to growing the economy. Unlike the last iteration of the CEDS, which set a stretch goal of increasing the population by 3000 over a five-year period, the numbers have been moderated. Aroostook and Washington counties have seen an increase in associate and bachelor's degrees since the 2020 Census and that trend will likely continue with free tuition at Community Colleges and innovative program like Your Pace at the University of Maine at Presque Isle and early college programs for University of Maine at Fort Kent and Machias. The region has also experienced Per Capita Income growth at greater increases than the rest of the state, but that may have to do with historically low wages compared to other regions.

By engaging local and regional business leaders in establishing measurable goals that are then linked to assets (natural, business and human resources), job creation and business expansion is accomplished from within the region. The foundational premise is that business, municipal and nonprofit leaders have the capacity to lead economic change if it is based on regional assets that are in our control.

Utilizing our asset-based process, we have identified the economic sectors that offer the best opportunity, and are investigating, defining and initiating business activities in those clusters that will improve wages and create new jobs to achieve the goals we have established.

AWEDD's approach to asset based economic development focuses on the regions competitive strengths and opportunities. Systematic regional asset mapping has been

completed in nine categories including tangible and intangible assets; natural, human/skills, knowledge, cultural/historic, geographic, excellence, infrastructure, government and innovation.

Output from this analysis resulted in priority regional assets, targeted industry clusters, strategies and specific industry sectors for value chain mapping.

AWEDD's priority industry clusters have remained the same from the previous version of the CEDS as they represent the most promising avenues to economic growth. They are Agriculture, Forest Resources, Marine Resources, Tourism, Manufacturing, and Renewable Energy.

In the next section we will outline a strategic direction/action plan highlighting some economic drivers for growth and prosperity including asset-based cluster development, entrepreneurship and innovation, access to capital and leadership. Part of that strategic plan will also focus on Broadband and workforce development.

Asset Cluster Based Development

The exploration and analysis of the regions assets has included a prioritization process consisting of a determination of assets that are “truly unique and indigenous” and that can be leveraged to reach the measurable economic vision.

Agriculture Goals and Strategies

Agriculture plays a key role in the economy of the AWEDD. Potatoes dominate agriculture in Aroostook County and blueberries are the major crop in Washington County. In 2021, Maine generated approximately \$0.8 billion in agricultural cash receipts, of those cash receipts potatoes, primarily grown in Aroostook, represent \$300 million². In 2021, the combined value of fresh and processed wild blueberries in Maine was \$80.3 million³.

The goals for the next five years are to accomplish 100 new farm businesses and jobs, increase value added production, increase net income to farmers by 10%, promote sustainable farming practices that conserve soil health, water resources and biodiversity.

To achieve those goals the AWEDD will utilize the strategies below.

Strategy 1.

Encourage diversification to supplement traditional potato and blueberry crops. Research new value-added crops and link growers to programs and resources to improve profitability.



Strategy 2.

Collaborate with local and regional partners to develop new markets for AWEDD’s agricultural products.

Strategy 3.

Engage entrepreneurs in development of new processing facilities, like a proposed \$55-million potato chip plan for the Loring Commerce Centre⁴.

² [MPB Study Ind \(mainepotatoes.com\)](https://mainepotatoes.com/)

³ [Blueberries | Agricultural Marketing Resource Center \(agmrc.org\)](https://agmrc.org/)

⁴ <https://thecounty.me/2024/02/21/business-news/developers-plan-a-55m-potato-chip-plant-on-former-aroostook-air-base/>

Forest Products Goals and Strategies

The AWEDD is home of two large paper mills. Woodland Pulp is the largest employer in Washington County, with approximately 310 employees. Twin Rivers in Madawaska is the largest employer in that municipality, with more than 400 employees. The AWEDD also has several smaller mills, focusing on whole tree timbers, lumber, fencing, mulch, log homes, specialty siding, veneers, and engineered panels. Logging and ancillary activities also generate a large economic impact as the majority of the AWEDD is forest land.

Goals in this industry cluster include increasing total value-added wood products manufacturing by 25%, increasing the workforce, and creating markets for wood waste.

Strategy 1.

Continue involvement with the FOR Maine ⁵initiative, initially funded by the Economic Development Administration, and align with its efforts to grow the forest economy.



Strategy 2.

Attract young people into the industry and ensure that new replacement and incumbent workers have the skills needed for the job.

Strategy 3.

Utilize sawmill residuals and low-value wood for heat and electricity generation, benefiting homes, businesses, and institutions.

Strategy 4.

NMDC, Aroostook Partnership and Sunrise County Economic Council will promote new forest products, like nanocellulose, biofuels and others to attract large scale manufacturers/producers to the AWEDD. (Biofuels will be addressed in greater detail in the renewable energy section.)

⁵ [Forest Opportunity Roadmap | FOR/Maine | FOR/Maine \(formaine.org\)](#)

Marine Resources Goals and Strategies

Washington County's marine resources offer opportunities for sustainable fishing, aquaculture, and economic growth.

Goals to grow the marine resources economy of Washington County include increasing marine related employment by 200 jobs by 2028 through expansion of research, harvesting, processing, and adaptation to climate changes.



Strategy 1.

Invest in infrastructure and workforce development.

Strategy 2.

Encourage research and development in marine industries and foster innovation in seafood processing and value-added marine products.

Strategy 3.

Monitor and manage the health of the marine ecosystem. Address challenges such as rising ocean temperatures, ocean acidification, and shifting species abundances.

Strategy 4.

Collaborate across sectors and leverage existing capacity and resources⁶.

⁶ [Maine Economy Highlights FINAL.indd \(umaine.edu\)](#)

Tourism Goals and Strategies

The AWEDD is also prime for increased tourist visits due to the beauty of the rocky coast of Washington County or the rolling fields of Aroostook County.



Aroostook is a region with great tourism potential for visitors who are looking for a unique and diverse experience. The county offers a variety of attractions and activities that showcase its natural beauty, cultural heritage, historical legacy, and friendly people.

Washington County is a region of Maine that offers a variety of attractions for tourists who want to experience the natural beauty, cultural heritage and outdoor recreation opportunities of the state.

Strengthen regional collaborations between the regions two Destination Marketing Organizations, Aroostook County Tourism and Downeast Acadia Regional Tourism, to achieve the following goals and strategies:



By 2028, increase overall Economic Impact of Tourism by 20%, total Employment Impact by 15%, Length of Stay by 0.5 nights, and the Number of Non-Peak Season Travelers by 12%.

Strategy 1.

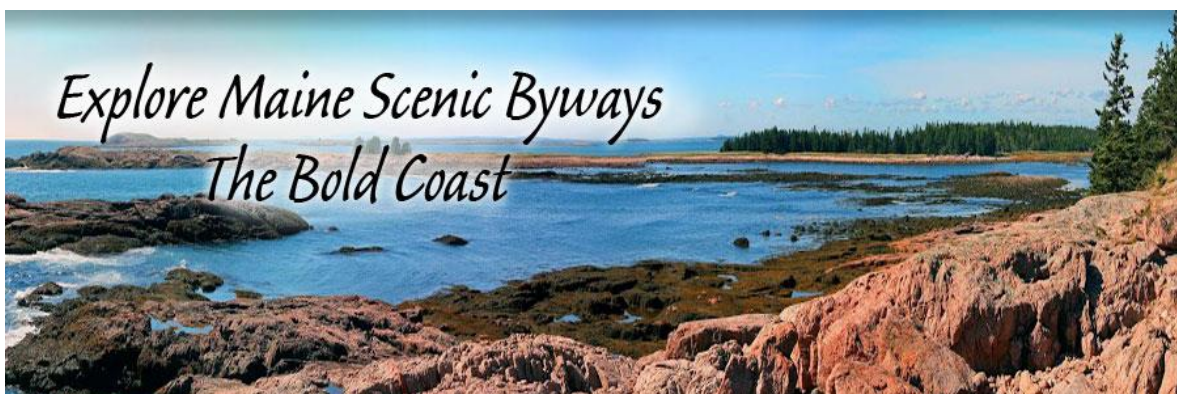
Coordinate public and private marketing dollars to promote Aroostook and Washington County jointly to attract visitors to explore less-traveled parts of the region and stay in the area longer.

Strategy 2.

Develop inter-regional campaigns that emphasize off-season outdoor activities.

Strategy 3.

Utilize our Scenic Byways as an important framework for encouraging inter-regional travel.



Strategy 4.

Expand upon existing visitor information tools used by Aroostook County Tourism and Downeast Acadia Regional Tourism to better assist visitors in planning a cohesive inter-regional experience.

Strategy 5.

Develop and refine stakeholder outreach tools to improve the quality and quantity of economic and visitor demographic information across the AWEDD, with an intended outcome of increased awareness of the importance of the industry, and increased citizen support and municipal investment.

Strategy 6.

Work with tourism businesses and community organizations in the AWEDD to improve their marketing and promotion tools and customer service skills and bring cohesiveness to the brand, story, and travel experience of the region.



Manufacturing Goals and Strategies

Growing the manufacturing economy of the AWEDD is a crucial endeavor for the region's long-term prosperity. Investing in biomaterials and nanocellulose could be a gain for manufacturing and the solution to the wood waste problem. There is also niche manufacturing present in the region like the Smith and Wesson facility in Houlton, Tiny Homes in Dyer Brook, and Morrison Manufacturing in Perry.

Multiple aerospace manufacturing businesses have expressed interest in locating in the AWEDD and one is locating in Presque Isle. The EDA is providing funds to assist the City in building a facility for the company at the Presque Isle International Airport.

By 2028 the AWEDD has a goal of growing 200 jobs in manufacturing and attracting at least five new manufacturing businesses to the region.

Strategy 1.

Invest in infrastructure from facilities to transportation.

Strategy 2.

Collaborate with educational institutions to offer specialized training programs for manufacturing skills and promote apprenticeships.

Strategy 3.

Encourage investment in research and development. Provide information on the availability of R and D grants.

Strategy 4.

Foster collaboration among related manufacturers (e.g., aerospace, food processing) to share knowledge and resources.

Strategy 5.

Encourage adoption of sustainable practices to reduce energy costs and environmental impact.

Renewable Energy Goals and Strategies

The AWEDD is a region with abundant renewable energy potential, especially in wind, biomass and tidal power. However, parts of the region have faced challenges in connecting its energy resources to the New England power grid, which has limited its economic development and environmental benefits.

Both Aroostook and Washington counties have currently operating large scale wind farms and an effort to build combined heat and power biomass plant in the region is underway. Another form of alternative energy is tidal power. Washington County is a coastal region with a high potential for tidal power development.

Advances in biofuels also mark a huge opportunity for economic development in the AWEED, as there are abundant forest resources.

Maine has ambitious renewable energy goals⁷ that aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and foster a clean energy economy, of which the AWEDD could play a substantial part. By 2030, the state plans to source 80% of its electricity from renewable sources, and by 2050, it aims to achieve 100% renewable electricity.

Realize 400 jobs in the Renewable Energy economy by 2028.

Strategy 1.

Capitalize on new technologies (biofuel, biomass, wind, tidal and other power generation) to generate green technology jobs and lessen dependence on fossil fuels.

Strategy 2.

Ensure that the transition to renewable energy benefits all communities. Address historical disparities and support low-income communities.

Strategy 3.

Encourage connection to ISO New England to realize multibillion dollar investments in wind generation in Aroostook County and to work with producers to encourage responsible development in the AWEDD.

Strategy 4.

Support workforce development initiatives at the Community College and University levels.

⁷ https://www.maine.gov/climateplan/sites/maine.gov/climateplan/files/inline-files/MaineWontWait_December2020_printable_12.1.20.pdf

Entrepreneurship and Access to Capital

Entrepreneurship and small businesses are the lifeblood of rural economies. They foster community connections, create jobs, and contribute to sustainable growth. As such both NMDC and Sunrise County Economic Council worked aggressively to promote entrepreneurship. NMDC formed the Center for Business Growth and SCEC has created the Maine Street Business Building. Both undertakings are to help entrepreneurs get established or scale up.



AWEDD continues to utilize a strategic lifecycle approach for access to capital. This lifecycle strategy includes the formation of capital sources from microloan/startup financing, debt and equity, growth and public finance. Access to capital strategies are directly linked to innovation and entrepreneurship, industry cluster development and infrastructure drivers.

The AWEDD is rural in nature and the distance to typical generators and supporters of vibrant innovation and entrepreneurship can be an isolating factor. Therefore, the region is pursuing a “right sized” innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem, utilizing the newly created in-region assets while building partnerships with external capacity resources to fill local gaps.

Broadband

Through Regional Tribal Broadband Partnership's with the Maine Connectivity Authority, Northern Maine Development Commission is working in tandem with Sunrise County Economic Council to advocate for the build of affordable fiber-optic internet infrastructure, support device programs and enhance digital literacy for our citizens.

In the Spring of 2023 with the support of our local partners: (Aroostook Partnership, The County of Aroostook, Aroostook County Action Program, Aroostook Agency on Aging, Four Directions, Greater East Grand Economic Council, Cary Medical Center and Aroostook Mental Health Services)(Washington was created by Sunrise County Economic Council's Digital Equity Coalition) a digital equity plan was created (one for each County) by surveying the covered populations of Aroostook and Washington County. These road maps will guide us and our partners in our various community roles to support the efforts mentioned above to get folks connected, educated and equipped with what they need to succeed in the digital world.



As we are in the 2nd year (2024) of the RTBP program we are trying to lay the groundwork that will create a sustainable and vibrant future for our community. While digital equity has many meanings, we will focus on digital empowerment to support our people in what they need, by not just handing it out but ensuring there is a purpose for these devices that will enhance their life whether it's through continuing education, workforce development, telehealth or ecommerce. Keeping in mind that we are trying to accomplish these 3 seemingly separate goals simultaneously as we cannot accomplish one without the other two.

We envision a future where every home, school, and business in Aroostook County has access to affordable, high-speed broadband internet. This will enable residents to work and learn remotely, access telehealth services, and connect with loved ones across the globe. Businesses will be able to compete on a global scale, creating jobs and economic opportunities for the community.

To achieve this vision, we will work with local, state, and federal partners to invest in broadband infrastructure, expand broadband coverage, and promote digital literacy among our residents. We will leverage new and emerging technologies to provide innovative solutions to connectivity challenges, and we will prioritize the needs of underserved and rural communities. Aroostook County's commitment to broadband will not only improve

the quality of life for our residents, but it will also position us for long-term success and competitiveness in the global economy.

The Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners Program was created to help deploy, sustain, and maximize the benefits of broadband infrastructure investment in all state regions. Each partner will build and lead digital inclusion efforts in their region and tribe while also providing support for community and regional-scale broadband infrastructure solutions and investments. Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners receive funding and support provided by the Maine Connectivity Authority in partnership with the Maine Broadband Coalition (MBC) and National Digital Equity Center (NDEC). The program goals are to support community-driven broadband solutions that ensure universal connectivity, strengthen and grow the number of partners thinking about digital equity and inclusion, and create alignment and coordination between communities, regions, and the state.

An ongoing challenge will be balancing the use of public funds to compete with, versus subsidizing our established private sector Internet Service Providers growing their closed private networks. NMDC will offer regional guidance to funders on how to equitably utilize public funds to best ensure optimal broadband coverage for all.

Workforce Development/Workforce Housing

Human capital is a top priority for the AWEDD region, and regional leaders recognize that development, retention, and attraction of sufficient quantity and quality workforce are essential to a sustainable Northern and Downeast Maine economy.

Stakeholders in the AWEDD have taken multiple steps to reinforce and leverage the resources and tools within economic and workforce development.

Starting in 2024, NMDC hired a workforce attraction/resident recruiter, Northern Maine Community College has for the past five years spearheaded the Northern Maine Growth Initiative, hiring a coordinator in 2023 to attract immigrant populations to the region, and Sunrise County Economic Council has ongoing attraction and retention initiatives.

The Northeastern Workforce Development Board (NWDB) serves Aroostook, Hancock, Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Washington Counties. The NWDB is one part of a workforce development system that includes a variety of partners and stakeholders. This network of partners presents opportunities to leverage additional resources and more effectively provide services to all customers.



As the Board works to develop new and reinforce existing partnerships, the goal is always the same: more effectively provide services to job seekers and employers, address skill gaps impeding economic growth, and develop career pathways that support the efforts of workers to access higher wages and more skilled employment⁸.

The goal is simple — to grow the labor pool to fill the hundreds of openings in the region.

Strategies to accomplish that include:

- Encourage more traditional “working age” Mainers to participate in the workforce. This involves addressing barriers such as access to childcare, support for people with disabilities, and older adults.
- Bolster safety-net programs and higher education opportunities to support existing residents in joining or rejoining the workforce
- Attract workers from other states and overseas. This can be achieved through targeted efforts to promote Maine as an attractive place to live, work, and learn.
- Maine needs to substantially increase the supply of housing. Affordable housing is a critical factor in attracting and retaining workers.

Housing has become a more critical factor in recent years. The EDD is in need of increasing the amount of affordable housing to meet the expected demands from industrial and commercial development in the region. The intent is to have a workforce that lives close to their jobs, reducing commute times and distances, and reducing pollution and traffic congestion on local streets. A lack of affordable housing also makes it difficult to recruit, hire, and retain employees such as doctors, teachers and nurses. The cost of housing, rental and owned, in both Washington and Aroostook Counties has outpaced the wages of many residents. Recently, local contractors stated that the cost of stick building a 1,600 square foot ranch style house was over \$400,000 and rents are in the \$850-\$1,100 range or more. According to a study completed by the University of Southern Maine, median income households cannot afford the median home in any county in Maine and the problem is higher with renters.

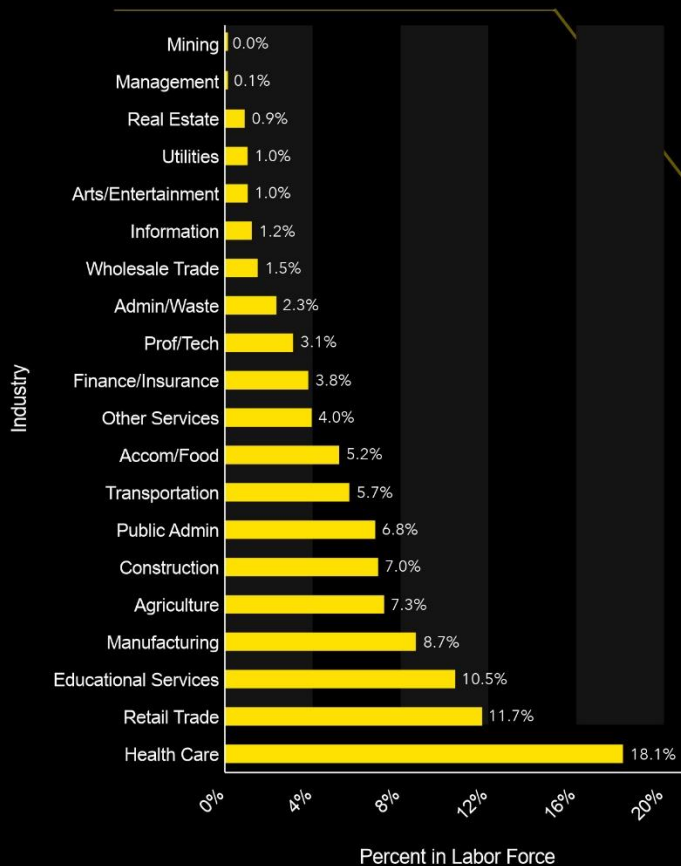
The need for affordable workforce housing is particularly acute in rural areas of Maine. Rural communities face unique challenges including limited economic opportunities and a smaller tax base. Affordable workforce housing initiatives can play a vital role in attracting or retaining residents and supporting local business and industry. Rural communities often struggle with population decline and affordable housing can help reverse this trend.

⁸ <https://www.northeasternwdb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021-Northeastern-Workforce-Development-Board-Strategic-Plan.pdf>

Economic Development Profile



Labor Force by Industry



16.6%

Services



27.5%

Blue Collar



55.9%

White Collar

Employment

Workforce Overview

Businesses



4,422

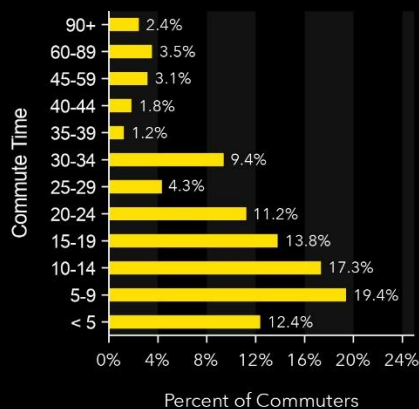
Total Businesses



53,910

Total Employees

Commute Time: Minutes



Transportation to Work



0.1%

Took Public Transportation



10.7%

Carpooled



3.3%

Walked to Work



0.1%

Bike to Work



79%

Drove Alone to Work

Evaluation Framework

A plan, like the Aroostook Washington Economic Development District Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, is only as good as how you measure success.

Our evaluation framework includes yearly progress reports on strategy success and advancement toward goals. Those reports will include:

- A logic model that illustrates the causal relationships between the CEDS inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts.
- A set of indicators that measure the quantity and quality of the CEDS outputs and outcomes, as well as the changes in the economic conditions and well-being of the AWEDD region.
- A data collection plan that specifies the sources, methods, frequency and responsibilities for collecting and analyzing the indicator data.
- A reporting plan that defines the format, content, audience and timing of the evaluation reports.
- A feedback mechanism that ensures the evaluation findings are used to inform decision-making and improve the CEDS implementation and effectiveness.

Economic Resilience

Economic resilience is the ability of a system to withstand and recover from shocks and stresses. Rural areas face many challenges in achieving economic resilience, such as low population density, limited infrastructure, environmental vulnerability, and dependence on a few sectors. However, rural areas also have unique assets and opportunities that can enhance their economic resilience, such as natural resources, social capital, innovation potential, and niche markets.



To foster economic resilience in the AWEDD, policymakers and practitioners need to adopt a holistic and place-based approach that considers the specific needs and strengths of each rural community. Some of the key strategies for building economic resilience in rural areas include:

- Diversifying the economic base and promoting value-added activities in agriculture, forestry, tourism, marine resources and other sectors.

- Investing in human capital and skills development to improve employability and entrepreneurship.
- Enhancing connectivity and accessibility through digital infrastructure and transport networks.
- Supporting social inclusion and participation to reduce inequalities and foster cohesion.
- Strengthening local governance and institutional capacity to enable effective planning and coordination.
- Leveraging regional cooperation and integration to access larger markets and share best practices.

Economic resilience in rural areas is not only important for the well-being of rural populations but also for the sustainability of national economies. By enhancing their economic resilience, rural areas can contribute to reducing poverty, improving food security, protecting biodiversity, mitigating climate change impacts, and fostering social innovation.

For a closer look at resilience in the AWEDD, see [Economic Resilience Strategy for the AWEDD](#).

Climate Resilience

The Aroostook Washington Economic Development District (AWEDD) is committed to enhancing the climate resiliency of its communities and businesses, as well as the natural and cultural resources that support them. We have identified several goals and strategies to promote climate resiliency, such as:

- Increasing the use of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and dependence on fossil fuels.
- Supporting the development of local food systems and agricultural diversification to increase food security and reduce vulnerability to supply chain disruptions.
- Enhancing the capacity of emergency management and public health systems to respond to and recover from climate-related hazards and disasters.
- Investing in infrastructure improvements and maintenance that incorporate climate risk assessment and adaptation measures.
- Promoting the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems and habitats that provide ecosystem services and buffer against climate impacts.
- Engaging with stakeholders and partners to raise awareness, share best practices, and foster collaboration on climate resiliency initiatives.

The AWEDD CEDS recognizes that climate resiliency is not only a challenge, but also an opportunity for economic development and innovation. By taking proactive steps to

prepare for and adapt to climate change, the AWEDD can enhance its competitiveness, sustainability, and quality of life for its residents and businesses.

Equity

For the first time in the CEDS the issue of equity is being highlighted to address social and economic disparities that affect the well-being and prosperity of region's residents.

We recognize that equity is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic advantage for fostering innovation, competitiveness, and resilience in the face of global challenges.

This CEDS proposes a set of goals, objectives, and actions to promote equity in the key areas: education and workforce development, entrepreneurship and business opportunities, housing and transportation, and civic engagement and leadership.

We are committed to engaging diverse stakeholders and communities in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the equity initiatives, ensuring that the voices and needs of the historically marginalized and underrepresented groups are heard and addressed.

Priority Projects

The criteria for project selection rely heavily on new jobs, wage level, and related benefits to determine priorities. One of the tools that will be used for project selection and impact will be the Northern New England Economic Model, a credentialed model developed by Connect Northern New England and Vital Economy. This model will be used to determine the economic impact of job creation in various sectors and how those jobs assist in accomplishing the regional goals.

If and when a significant project is proposed that needs to be added and/or moved on the priority list, NMDC staff members will prepare a project-scoring sheet that will be circulated to CEDS subcommittee members who will be polled on the proposed action. The poll may be taken by telephone, in person or in writing (including email). The person taking the poll shall record each Council member's vote in writing. Any action taken by a majority of the Council shall be deemed the action of the Council, provided that no Council member expresses objection to informal action being taken without a meeting at the time of the poll. If there is an objection, a special meeting will be called.

As of the end of 2023 only one priority project was identified, but additional projects will be added as needed.

1. Jonesport Working Waterfront

The Jonesport working waterfront project is an initiative to revitalize the town's marine economy and culture by creating a hub for commercial fishing and aquaculture. The project aims to provide infrastructure, services, and access for local fishermen and aquaculture operators, as well as educational and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors. The project is supported by a grant from the Maine Working Waterfront Access Protection Program (WWAPP), which helps preserve coastal properties for water-dependent uses.

The project involves acquiring a portion of the town-owned campground on Henry Point and developing it into a multi-use facility that includes a pier, a boat ramp, a fish processing plant, an ice house, a fuel station, a gear storage area, and a public park. The project also involves partnering with Kingfish Maine, a company that plans to build a land-based recirculating aquaculture system (RAS) facility nearby. Kingfish Maine will produce yellowtail kingfish, a high-value species that can be sold to domestic and international markets. The company will also provide jobs, training, and research opportunities for the community.

The Jonesport working waterfront project is expected to have positive impacts on the town's economy, environment, and social fabric. It will enhance the viability and diversity of the local fishing industry, increase tax revenues and property values, attract new businesses and visitors, protect water quality and marine habitats, preserve maritime heritage and traditions, and foster civic engagement and pride among residents. The project is currently in the pre-construction design and engineering phase after receiving approval from the Jonesport Planning Board. The project leaders hope to complete the construction by 2025.

Acknowledgements

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Data for this document is from the American Community Survey, Bureau of Economic Analysis and U.S. Census Bureau. Additional graphics were developed using the Headwaters Economics Economic Profile System.

This is the first year for this iteration of the Aroostook Washington Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. A complete rewrite is scheduled for late 2028.

Comments or questions about this document can be sent to Jon Gulliver, Director of Investor and Community Relations at Northern Maine Development Commission, jgulliver@nmdc.org.