

ASSET-BASED DEVELOPMENT FOCUS AREA
Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place
Belfast, Maine - July 13, 2007

1. Definition and Relation to Quality of Place

“Asset-based development” refers to initiatives that build upon a region’s unique assets and capacities. An asset-based development strategy first identifies a region’s assets: the skills and abilities of its residents, organizations, businesses, and institutions; and its natural, historical, and cultural resources. It then designs initiatives that build on those assets to create new opportunities, by enhancing them, marketing them, and combining them in new and productive ways. The alternative is “needs-based development,” which entails identifying a region’s deficiencies and designing initiatives that focus on “correcting” them.

Leadership for asset-based development generally comes from within the region, since local residents are generally most knowledgeable about their region’s strengths and how to leverage them. Needs-based development initiatives often look to institutions, resources, or service providers outside the region, such as universities, non-profit groups, and government agencies.

Within a Quality of Place framework, an asset-based development approach would begin by identifying a region’s positive Quality of Place attributes, and then create initiatives to protect, enhance, and develop them in a sustainable manner.

2. Recent Pertinent Legislation

- LD 64, “An Act to Recapitalize the Maine Downtown Center,” requested \$300,000 over the biennium. The Appropriations Committee ultimately approved \$150,000.
- LD 253, “An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Joint Select Committee on Research, Economic Development and the Innovation Economy,” established a council to promote science and technology research that will benefit the state’s economy, and suggested targets for increasing the percentage of General Funds for research and development. The bill passed and is now PL 2007, c. 420.
- LD 262, “An Act to Amend the Credit for Rehabilitation of Historic Properties,” received unanimous Taxation Committee support but, due to a fiscal note, was held over until next year.
- LD 656, “Resolve, to Focus State Agency Efforts in Economic Development on Entrepreneurial Sustainability and Growth,” directs DECD to facilitate the creation of economic development plans for three counties by local business, government, and non-profit leaders. The bill passed and is now R 2007, c. 38.

- LD 1007, “An Act to Promote County-Based Economic and Community Development,” grants county governments the authority to raise funds for county economic and community development initiatives. The bill passed and is now PL 2007, c. 321.
- LD 1848, “An Act to Promote Sustainable Prosperity,” would, among other things, provide funding for Cluster Development and Community Enhancement Funds, and directs SPO to conduct a pilot regional planning project with multiple municipalities. The bill has been held over until next year.
- LD 1872, “An Act to Preserve Maine’s Quality Places,” proposed an increase in the lodging tax and a surcharge on registry deeds as funding sources for “Quality of Place” investments. The bill was voted “Ought Not to Pass” by the Business, Research and Economic Development Committee.
- Bonds – The Appropriations Committee agreed on a three-part, \$295 million bond package: in June, voters approved \$132 million for transportation and water quality projects; in November 2007 and June 2008, voters will consider a total of \$164 million for research and development, education, natural resources, and environmental and transportation projects.

Asset-based highlights (all on November 2007 referendum):

Maine Technology Institute: \$50 million to support research, development, and commercialization efforts by Maine-based technology businesses.

Land for Maine’s Future: \$17 million for land conservation.

New Century Community Program: \$2 million to revitalize downtown areas, preserve and strengthen state and community historic and cultural assets, and expand access to digital and educational resources.

Riverfront Community Development Program: \$5 million to help communities along state rivers revitalize their riverfronts and to promote river-oriented community development.

3. Recent Pertinent Studies and Recommendations

David Vail, 2007, “World-Class Tourism: A Big Push Strategy” in *Health Care and Tourism: A Lead Sector Strategy for Rural Maine* (Maine Center for Economic Policy).

Dr. Vail asserts that Maine has the natural assets to become a world-class tourism destination, but that won’t happen without a concerted effort to build upon those assets in strategic ways. His recommendations include:

- Shape and brand a large scale Maine Woods recreation area with drawing power similar to the proposed Maine Woods National Park – but without federal ownership or control;
- Create national awareness of rural Maine’s culture and heritage attractions; and
- Upgrade the quality of tourism services and tourism jobs by supporting the spread of best business practices.

Brookings Institution, 2006, “Charting Maine’s Future: An Action Plan for Promoting Sustainable Prosperity and Quality Places.”

Brookings asserts that Maine’s Quality of Place in many respects drives our economy. In this, we’re “surprisingly well-positioned for the future” (pp. 6). However, there is “nothing inevitable about the realization of a new era of sustainable prosperity in Maine” (pp. 99). In other words, Maine must take deliberate steps to protect and build upon its ample natural and cultural amenities if it is to prosper. Brookings’s recommendations include:

- 10-year, \$190 million “Quality Places Fund” for community revitalization, land and farm conservation, access to forests and lakes, and tourism promotion;
- Annual \$5-\$8 million “Maine Community Enhancement Fund” to support building code reform, the Maine Downtown Center, “visioning tools and planning assistance for towns,” and incentives for regional planning; and
- 3-year, \$200 million “Maine Innovation Jobs Fund” for research and development and industry-led cluster development.

FERMATA, 2005, “Strategic Plan for Implementing the Maine Nature Tourism Initiative.”

In 2005, the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development hired FERMATA, a Vermont-based tourism development consulting firm, to evaluate the possibilities for Maine in the nature-based tourism industry. FERMATA concluded that Maine’s natural resources “are substantial enough to serve as a foundation for successful [nature-based tourism] strategy” (pp. 2). However, strategic investments and coordinated efforts are needed to fully leverage those resources. Specific recommendations include:

- Conduct a statewide inventory and assessment of natural, historical, and cultural resources;

- Leverage resources by creating regional wildlife/heritage trails, publishing regional guides with suggested itineraries, installing uniform “wayfinding” and interpretive signs, and building strategic “gateway” visitor center;
- Integrate marketing efforts across institutional lines;
- “Coordinate efforts and share information” to leverage social capital;
- Provide training and support for small businesses that cater to tourists, offer hospitality training for “front-line” service staff; and
- Address unresolved issues of compensation for private landowners, carrying capacity, development of the Northwoods, and land acquisition needs.

4. Examples of Asset-Based Development

- Maine Highlands Guild

This nonprofit organization supports artisans in Penobscot and Piscataquis counties by providing training, networking, and mentoring opportunities to access new markets and increase sales. The guild “grew out of grassroots work by local citizens to find and promote artisans and other cultural resources in the region. It operates from a strategy that flowed from careful analysis at the local and regional level to move rural Maine ahead economically, while at the same time preserving the sense of place that makes these communities special.” The guild is highly regarded both within Maine and nationally.

<http://www.themainehighlands-guild.com>

- University of Maine-Bangor Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC)

In 1994, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) program to create and enhance collaborative ties between higher education institutions and communities. This program stemmed from HUD’s observation that colleges and universities could be valuable allies in economic and community development, but many are disconnected from the plights of their host regions. The University of Maine-Bangor COPC, established in 2006, is linking university faculty and students with community organizations to design and implement programs that address community inclusion, youth empowerment, and affordable housing.

<http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/projects/copc/default.htm>

- Maine Winter Sports Center

“Since 1999 the Maine Winter Sports Center staff and volunteers have worked around the state to re-establish skiing as a lifestyle in Maine. At the heart of this effort is the goal of creating a new economic and cultural model for Maine's rural communities - one that keeps young families together and attracts businesses looking for a high quality of life for their employees. In this model community-run non-profit ski areas provide an epicenter

for programs for all ages and serve as economic engines for these communities.” The Centers are funded by a combination of public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic sources, and operated by full-time staff and volunteers.

<http://www.mainejsc.org>

- Maine North Star Alliance Initiative

The North Star Alliance is a new industry-led initiative to strengthen and expand Maine’s boat building, composites, and marine trades industries. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor and housed at the Maine State Planning Office. It connects industry associations, public research and education institutions, community organizations, and economic development agencies to enhance their approaches to business development, research, education, and training. The initiative seeks to combine and build existing resources in ways that create new opportunities for all parties.

<http://www.maine.gov/wired>

- Fusion Bangor

Fusion Bangor is a program of the Bangor Region Chamber of Commerce that promotes networking and activism among residents age 20-40. It connects current and potential young residents who have energy and interest in the long-term vitality of the Bangor region. A group of young-professional volunteers runs Fusion, with financial support from a range of public and private sources. In just two years, Fusion has greatly increased the visibility of the region’s young professionals and enhanced the region’s image as a place for young people to live and work.

<http://www.fusionbangor.com>

5. Suggested Reading

Introduction to “Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets” by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, pp. 1-11, Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research (1993). Available online:

<http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/community/introd-building.html>

6. Initial Questions for Consideration

Should Maine pursue an asset-based development strategy?

If so, which existing programs, initiatives, and structures would support that strategy? Which would undermine it? (Another way of looking at this is, “What is working and what is not?”)

What would be the roles of state and local governments, private businesses, nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, etc.?