

# Washington Aroostook Regional Plan for Sustainable Development (WARPSD)

## Application Abstract

This strategic planning initiative will provide cross-cutting discussion to engage the non-profit, municipal and county organizations of Washington and Aroostook counties in a manner never considered before this grant program offering. It will also engage the constituent residents and communities of these groups and their partners in wholly new and expansive ways.

Washington and Aroostook Counties are the northern and easternmost counties in Maine with a land mass of over 9,200 square miles. While these two counties have many attributes in common - they are the two largest counties in the state and the two poorest as well - this will be first time that a common strategic planning exercise will be undertaken by groups from both areas.

The objectives of this effort will certainly address the proscribed plan components; i.e., that of creating an integrated regional plan that addresses housing, transportation, water infrastructure, environmental planning, and economic/workforce development. It will also rely on the latest available data and sophisticated GIS modeling to perform a climate change impact assessment and conduct scenario planning as a means of predicting outcomes from an inclusive visioning process. In addition to the Consortium members, there will be involvement of more than 40 partner entities for their assistance and input in the process; as well as many activities, forums and techniques to engage the general public.

The eleven member Consortium represents the combined population of 104,175 people through the participation of both elected County governments. It also possesses the skills and experience to perform the work through the participation of the four regional agencies that provide technical guidance, assistance and coordination of regional planning in the areas of economic development, workforce development, land use and transportation planning (Northern Maine Development Commission, Washington Aroostook Workforce Investment Board, Sunrise County Economic Council and Washington County Council of Governments). It also possesses the expertise and outreach networks of the three agencies who deliver housing assistance to those in need throughout the region (Washington Hancock Community Agency, Aroostook County Action Program, Four Directions Development Corporation). Furthermore, the consortium includes the two state agencies with the interest, skills and experience to ensure that the regional plan can be implemented in accordance with state law, addresses any necessary changes to state law, and is sensitive to local authority. And finally, the partners to the consortium provide outreach to every segment of the community – business, social service, academic, year-round and seasonal Hispanic, Native American, recreational, natural resource management, workforce and career development – ensuring that the product will be grounded in the realities of our community.

The need for this funding and for a Regional Plan for Sustainable Development is extreme. The entire region is an area of severe economic distress as defined by HUD: median household income is the lowest of all Maine counties and less than 70% of the national average. In addition, unemployment rates in the Washington Aroostook Workforce Investment Area (encompassing both counties) have exceeded 1.2 times the national average in 4 out of the last 5 years: Outmigration, particularly of children and young members of the workforce is also a significant problem for the region. The data assembled for Factor 2 reveals that homeowners are paying over 53% in Washington County and over 60% in Aroostook County for the combined costs of housing and transportation. This reflects the low median incomes, high housing costs and the reality that 89% or

more of regional trips are done in private automobiles. Very low population density in the entire region creates substantial challenges to the feasibility of mass transit development. In addition, for every indicator of preventable disease both counties have rates that are much higher or within the margin of error to put them higher than those at the state and at the national level.

The requirement to establish need and outcomes based on measurable data is very powerful and consistent with an asset mapping-based approach to sustainable economic renewal. The fact of the relative impoverishment of the Washington Aroostook region is not new. The new element in this initiative is to take stock of our strong assets – human, natural and capital – and to position our economy for a sustainable future. The WARPSD therefore 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.

To address HUD policy priorities the WARPSD includes multiple opportunities to share lessons among partners and to disseminate those lessons. In addition to policy, results will be data driven. Among other metrics, the consortium will track the change in *median household income* as the primary indicator for success of the WARPSD. Policy lessons and metrics will use the research and publication networks of the two universities, Maine Sea Grant and the Cooperative Extension Service. Extensive outreach across other media is also proposed to reach community members. In addition to media, community meetings and use of partner networks for release of “highlights”, a web site will be dedicated to the WARPSD for monthly fact sheets, draft documents and input.

The most powerful aspect of this grant funding is the requisite collaboration among the agencies and affected populations within and between the two counties. The leadership provided by the federal collaboration of HUD, DOT and EPA has spurred a strategic response from the local, regional and state levels. This opportunity will not only create the WARPSD it will also establish dialogue among and between regional groups and serve as a basis for long term collaboration. The WARPSD will allow coordination among a full cross section of existing and new development initiatives thereby achieving unprecedented integration and synergy among the consortium and within the community.