

The Revitalization of Central Maine | Recompete Plan Approval

ELIGIBLE GEOGRAPHIC AREA/SERVICE AREA

The Skowhegan/Waterville region is centrally located in the state of Maine. Skowhegan, situated at the crossroads of two major state roads, Route 201 (N/S) and Route 2 (E/W), serves as the seat of Somerset County, a rural county with low income and educational attainment and high rates of those living in poverty (20%) or with a disability. Waterville, transected by Interstate 95, is in northern Kennebec County, the state's fourth most populous county, with an average lower income and educational attainment rate. In both communities, a large percentage of the population is at or near retirement age. (Kennebec County & Somerset Community Health Needs Assessments, 2022)

The specific area to be served will include the Skowhegan/Waterville Route 201 corridor that encompasses the towns of Skowhegan and Fairfield (in LLM Commuting Zone 269 with a PAEG of 4.85), as well as the city of Waterville (a Local Community with a PAEG of 6).

CULTURE OF COLLABORATION & INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

Skowhegan and Waterville are working hard to overcome regional challenges by focusing on asset-based development. Thanks to strong leadership, both communities have recently begun to see investment and economic growth. The decision to partner on regional initiatives was an easy one. Each community has specific, yet complementary strengths—Waterville is an arts and innovation hub and Skowhegan is leading the way in local food/agriculture and outdoor recreation.

Both communities have similar challenges, and what better way to tackle regional issues than with a regional approach? To that end, we began planning collaborative regional revitalization efforts several months ago, and a Recompete application is the obvious next step. Many members of our coalition are already partnered on a regional development and brand strategy initiative—led by Main Street Skowhegan and the Central Maine Growth Council—that will kick off in November; prioritizing workforce development will be an easy addition to this strategic effort.

As we continue to attract outside investment and new businesses, the time to tackle workforce challenges, specifically the PAEG, is NOW. Within the next few years, regional employer New Balance—who is currently expanding operations in Skowhegan—plans to hire an additional 200 employees. Other regional employers are seriously concerned about filling open positions—and as a result, have reduced hours of operation. It's critical that we address this shortage by re-engaging our residents in the workforce.

Lead Applicant Credentials

Main Street Skowhegan is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on the ongoing revitalization of Skowhegan, Maine. Our mission is to celebrate Skowhegan's rich heritage while achieving our brightest future as a thriving economic, cultural, and recreational community where residents enjoy a high quality of life. At the core of our approach to community revitalization is a commitment to shared prosperity, equitable access to opportunity, and inclusive engagement. Founded in 2005 by a group of citizens, Main Street's team comprises hardworking staff, energetic AmeriCorps members, a dedicated Board of Directors, and hundreds of volunteers—all working to execute the Skowhegan Strategic Plan for Community Transformation.

Main Street Skowhegan is spearheading several major initiatives, and through these initiatives, we have raised millions in public/private funding and developed strong regional partnerships. As a result, Main Street Skowhegan is uniquely positioned to lead a collaborative regional effort that will bring together public, private, professional, philanthropic, and nonprofit representatives to solve one of our region’s greatest challenges.

Regional Coalition Members

- Main Street Skowhegan (lead applicant)
- Town of Skowhegan (municipality)
- Skowhegan Economic Development Corp. (economic development org)
- Somerset Economic Development Corp. (economic development org)
- Central Maine Growth Council (economic development org)
- Kennebec Valley Council of Governments (regional COG)
- Central Western Maine Workforce Development Board (workforce org)
- Kennebec Valley Community College (educational institution)
- Sappi North America (employer)
- New Balance (employer)
- Redington-Fairview General Hospital (employer/health org)
- Maine Grains (employer)
- The Good Crust (employer)
- Pathways to Recovery Consortium (including: Redington-Fairview General Hospital, Somerset Public Health, Kennebec Behavioral Health, Somerset County Sheriff’s Office, Skowhegan Police Department, El Rancho De La Vida, Kennebec Valley Community Action Program, and HealthReach Community Health Center)

We are supported by Maine’s Commissioner of the Department of Economic and Community Development, Heather Johnson, and the Maine’s Governor, Janet Mills.

REGIONAL NEEDS, CONDITIONS, AND REASONS FOR A HIGH PAEG

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics article “Employment barriers within low- and moderate-income communities” include: “job availability and pay; qualifications, education, and training; transportation; childcare and family issues; crime and substance abuse; housing instability; disabilities and mental and physical health; and public assistance programs.”

In addition, recent data shows that loneliness is a contributing factor to unemployment. The study, published in *BMC Public Health*, found that people who reported "feeling lonely often" were significantly more likely to encounter unemployment later.

Based on the above data, identified barriers to employment, and local statistics and anecdotal evidence, we can surmise that regional residents 25-54 are no longer participating in the workforce for the following reasons:

Barrier	Regional Challenges
Job pay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Median earnings in Skowhegan: \$36,781 (men) \$21,963 (women); retail trade represents 24% of the industry, which doesn’t rank within the top

	<p>five industries for earning potential (DataUS.io)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similarly, in Waterville median earnings for men are \$35,051 and \$25,483 for women, with the two top industries—education and retail trade—not ranking in the top five industries for earning potential (DataUS.io) • Respondents to the Somerset County community health assessment were concerned about jobs providing living wages (CHNA, 2022) • Wages are not keeping up with rising costs of housing & childcare. While we have a number of large employers, many of our businesses are small and locally owned and cannot pay much above minimum wage.
Lack of qualifications, education, training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 29% of Somerset County and 39% of Kennebec County residents have an associate degree or higher; high school graduation rates in Somerset hover around 80% (CHNA, 2022) • Maine data shows that 53% of those with less than a high school diploma are in the workforce compared to 74% of those with a high school diploma and 87% of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher. (Maine’s WIOA State Plan, 2020-2023)
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both Somerset and Kennebec County residents named transportation as a major challenge in the Community Health Needs Assessments, 2022; 14% of households in Skowhegan have no vehicle, while 40% only have one vehicle (2021 Skowhegan Housing Needs Assessment)
Childcare & family issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to a study by ReadyNation, Maine has a shortage of 1,090 childcare teachers and staff which has created a massive gap between how many children a facility is licensed to care for and how many are actually being enrolled. (WGME13 News) • Rates of children facing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) outpace the state as a whole: 27% (Somerset) and 22.3% (Kennebec) vs. state 21.3% (CHNA, 2022)
Substance abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional drug-induced deaths per 100,000 pop. outpace the state: 38.4 (Kennebec) and 32.5 (Somerset) vs. the state at 29.5. (CHNA, 2022)
Disabilities & mental / physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somerset County has higher-than-average rates of people w/ disabilities • Mental health emergency department rates per 10,000 population significantly outpaced the state average (181.5) in Kennebec County (224.6) and were elevated in Somerset (183.5) (CHNA, 2022)
Loneliness, social isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social isolation and no place for seniors to gather in their communities were among challenges noted in the Somerset County CHNA, 2022; in addition, loneliness has been described as a ‘public health epidemic’ (Royal College of General Practitioners, 2018)

REGIONAL ASSETS CRITICAL TO REDUCING THE PAEG

The following regional assets represent employers; entrepreneurial ecosystem builders that can support startups and founders; career, technical, and educational institutions that can upskill our

workforce; and public health organizations that can help residents overcome barriers to employment:

<p>Career & Technical Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kennebec Valley Community College ● Somerset Career & Technical Center ● Mid-Maine Technical Center ● Maine CareerCenter (regional) ● Mid-Maine Regional Adult & Comm. Ed. ● Lawrence Adult & Community Education ● RSU 54 Adult Education ● Thomas College ● Colby College 	<p>Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Builders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Skowhegan Center for Entrepreneurship ● Dirigo Labs ● The Kitchen at 185 (future shared community kitchen, incubator, and food hall to be located in Skowhegan) ● Bricks Coworking ● Small Business Development Center
<p>Regional Public Health Orgs/Hospitals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Somerset Public Health ● Kennebec Behavioral Health ● Kennebec Valley Comm. Action Program ● Redington-Fairview General Hospital ● MaineGeneral Medical Center ● Northern Light Inland Hospital 	<p>Anchor Employers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● New Balance ● Huhtamaki ● Sappi North America ● T-Mobile ● Sheridan Corporation ● Hospitals & educational institutions ● Many small, locally owned businesses

While the above represent traditional workforce development assets, we believe a more comprehensive, community-based approach will be imperative to the success of this initiative. Below you'll find additional community assets that—with some enhancement—can offer support, gathering space, engagement, and activities to help reduce loneliness and provide healthy alternatives to unproductive behaviors that are keeping our residents from the workforce.

- Historic downtowns/community villages in Skowhegan, Waterville, and Fairfield
- Outdoor recreation assets, including local trail networks, two community ski hills (one open, one currently closed), a riverwalk in Waterville, and a future river park, river access trails, and a riverfront promenade in Skowhegan
- Regional food hub, including farmers' markets, grist mill, and many food producers and locally owned food-based businesses
- Cultural assets, including two historic opera houses, museums, coffee shops, theaters, and several parks

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND PREDEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

It's imperative that our work is grounded in community-based strategies that not only address local challenges head-on, but are also in-keeping with local character and strategic goals. With a group of strong leaders, organizations, and municipalities that are already partnering on initiatives, as well as local strategies for revitalization and a regional CEDS as our guide, our coalition is well positioned to quickly and effectively finalize a strategy for Recomplete Plan Implementation.

Strategy Development/Pre-Implementation Steps

1. *Hire coalition's Recompete Plan Coordinator (RPC) to finalize strategies while strengthening current partner relationships, growing the coalition, and bolstering regional capacity to*

execute strategies of the Recompete Plan.

2. *Hire firm to assist with additional research/assessment to finalize strategies and tasks/activities necessary to prepare for strategy implementation.*
 - a. Conduct regional hard- and soft-skills gap inventories
 - b. Identify additional regional talent-based target industries
 - c. Refine sector-based pathways and apprenticeship programs
 - d. Further explore state programs for ways to enhance and expand access in our region, including Maine Workforce Development Compact and Maine’s Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE)—programs that offer support for underserved individuals looking to develop new or additional skills
 - e. Work with partners to further develop strategies for increased regional transportation; explore GOMAINE Commuter Connection program
 - f. Determine effective ways to incorporate underserved populations into planning process
 - g. Coordinate with public health partners to assess gaps in social/support services
 - h. Finalize commitments from partners

TESTED INTERVENTIONS THAT WILL ADDRESS REGIONAL NEEDS AND LEVERAGE REGIONAL ASSETS TO GROW THE ECONOMY

We propose the following interventions:

Intervention Approach: Creating New, Good Jobs

Through our regional economic development work, we’ll continue to grow asset-based niche markets (local food, outdoor rec, arts, innovation) and encourage new business development and investment in the region, bringing new, good paying jobs. Further investment in our local entrepreneurs will also be important.

Strategy: Strengthen the Regional Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

- Grow regional startup, incubation, and accelerator programs
 - Region-specific childcare, food-sector, and outdoor rec business lab & pitch competitions – FREE opportunities for underserved individuals interested in starting a business
 - Invest additional funding to complete construction on the shared community kitchen, incubator, and food hall, The Kitchen at 185 (planned for Skowhegan)
 - Provide TA and funding to existing businesses to accelerate growth and create new jobs

Success Story: Dirigo Labs (prog of the Central Maine Growth Council) and the Skowhegan Center for Entrepreneurship (prog of Main Street Skowhegan) have helped hundreds of founders in the two years since their launch, supporting our regional entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Intervention Approach: Connect People to Existing Jobs

With regional efforts underway to grow existing businesses and attract new jobs, it’s critical we have a strong and skilled workforce. According to predictions in Maine’s 10-year Economic Development Strategy, the state will need 60-65% of its workers to have credentials by 2025. Re-engaging our unemployed/underemployed will be critical to the growth of our region.

Strategy: Invest in Training for Employees

Many local jobs require skilled employees—a factor that directly impacts the PAEG. Upskilling our workforce with specific skills identified by regional employers will be key to connecting individuals with jobs.

- Develop/enhance base-level skills training, including soft skills and job-readiness and hard skills based on employer assessment; prepare for career pathways and apprenticeships
 - Work with CTEs and state to promote and utilize state’s system of microcredentials
 - Improve training by aligning curriculum with knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by employers
 - Incorporate paid volunteer/community service opportunities to help develop soft skills
 - Tap into successful, statewide programs by adding local resources for on-the-ground coordinating and execution

Strategy: Develop Career Pathways and Apprenticeship Programs

The areas below represent regional strengths and talent-based targets, as well as three of Maine’s four “thematic areas” in which the state has current strengths, as identified in Maine’s 10-year Economic Development Strategy. Developing pathways in prominent and growing regional sectors will reinforce our asset-based approach to workforce development.

- *Making/Milling/Manufacturing:* With several major employers in the manufacturing sector, career pathways in this discipline with apprenticeship programs at individual employers would allow for specific skill-building (grain/food processing, wood processing, shoemaking).
- *Skilled Trades/Technical Services:* There is a dire need for skilled tradespeople in traditional industries as well as those that are rapidly evolving with new technology. We’ll work with partner trade businesses to create opportunities for paid, on-the-job training opportunities.
- *Food/Agriculture:* From growing and processing to baking and culinary arts, career pathways would support our many growing food and agricultural businesses.
- *Outdoor Recreation:* Many regional residents have a passion for the outdoors, but perhaps don’t see it as a viable career path. As we grow our outdoor recreation economy, we’ll need more skilled employees who can fill these sector-specific jobs. We’ll utilize our current Skowhegan Outdoors program as a launch point; job examples include bike maintenance technicians, trail design professionals, trail construction laborers, and more.

Success Story: Local business, The Good Crust, offers workforce training to folks with unique needs—people of all different cognitive and physical abilities and personal life circumstances. Through collaboration with community vocational rehabilitation providers and schools, they use dough operations for work-based learning experiences, so apprentices can grow into strong employees, team players, leaders, and community members. We look forward to expanding this program to other employers.

Invest in Training for Employers

Not all employers are prepared to hire individuals with unique challenges. Providing training will be an important step toward successfully connecting people to jobs—and retaining them.

- Train employers to work with underserved individuals, including those in recovery, recently incarcerated, and people with mental and physical disabilities and personal life circumstances

- Focus on Recovery Friendly Workplaces-RFW (NH model)
 - Execute public awareness and education events
 - Train employers to create a supportive, recovery-friendly workplace
 - Provide workplaces with resources to promote health, well-being, and recovery, and to plan trainings related to substance misuse, behavioral health, and addiction
- Provide employers with resources to bolster benefits packages to enhance the quality of local jobs

Expand Public Transportation Options

Lack of public transportation is a major barrier to employment in our region. A regional, collaborative approach will be critical to solving this problem.

- Expand regional public transportation (refine strategy this winter)

Expand Addiction & Mental Health Support

As evidenced in the above table, addiction and mental health are significant barriers to employment. Participants in the Community Health Needs Assessment noted the need for additional support centers in our area (Somerset & Kennebec CHNA, 2022).

- Fund addiction rehabilitation programming and support (refine strategy this winter)
- Plan and execute community-promoted addiction rehabilitation programming; incorporate training and employment information

Success Story:

Kennebec Valley Community Action Program and a group of local advocates have raised \$2.8 million for an early learning center wing of the new elementary school in Skowhegan. This will help combat some of our regional childcare challenges while giving our local youth a strong start.

Prioritize Community Connectedness, Civic Engagement, and Social Cohesion

Community Health Needs Assessment participants noted the need for more community engagement to help combat substance use (Somerset CHNA, 2022).

- Bolster aspirations of un/underemployed through paid community and civic engagement opportunities
- Plan FREE programs and events to bring people together

Invest in Built Infrastructure to Increase Public Connectedness

Additional community-based infrastructure, greenspace, and programming will help us engage our residents while reducing loneliness and social isolation and increasing well-being.

- Encourage the development of third spaces via funding stipends
- Construct more public greenspace, walkways, seating areas for active and inclusive engagement [Federal and possible match funding]
- Improve accessibility of historic downtowns, including sidewalks, storefronts, etc. [Possible DOT funding]

COMMITMENTS

We are committed to re-engaging our workforce in equitable and inclusive ways, focusing on underserved, rural individuals and people with unique circumstances, including mental and physical challenges and substance abuse disorders. By making training and re-employment accessible and welcoming, we can support all residents in the process.

In order to achieve our goals, we'll need to grow the coalition, adding a labor union and perhaps others. We'll also need to develop deeper partnerships with public health organizations to better align and refine our approach to effectively engage area residents. It will also be important to include representatives from the target population in the planning process.

During the strategy development phase, we'll work with partners to develop commitments. We anticipate the following, in addition to several others:

- Employers provide input into the design of training and apprenticeship programs
- Employers commit to offering on-the-job training and apprenticeship opportunities
- Community college and CTEs participate in curriculum development for training programs
- Funding commitments from various entities and philanthropic partners

In addition to focusing on refining the plan and securing commitments, we'll seek opportunities to leverage funding (as noted above in some places). MaineDOT and federal DOT funding, as well as Community Development Block Grant funding, USDA grants, and other state and local funding could enhance the implementation plan.

We are thrilled about this opportunity and excited to get started! With a strong group of local leaders and asset-based, community-centric strategies for regional resilience and workforce development, we'll reduce the prime-age employment gap while cultivating a region of happy, healthy people with the confidence, skills, and resources to secure the jobs they desire.