

Parallels between Somerset County and Franklin County CGPZ projects

Planning Committee Meeting, 7.28.2015

Franklin and Somerset Counties share significant natural features and recreational resources. Both counties face similar economic development challenges and land use issues.

Shared natural resources:

- The Boundary Mountains, which extend through the northern part of the planning area;
- The Bigelow Mountain range, which straddles the border between the two counties;
- The upper Kennebec river watershed, which extends into both counties and includes numerous rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds; and
- Flagstaff Lake and portions of the Dead River, which are near the border between the two counties and are commonly accessed from both counties.

Shared recreational resources:

- The Appalachian Trail;
- The Interconnected Trail System (ITS) for snowmobile enthusiasts;
- Maine Huts and Trails;
- The Northern Forest Canoe Trail; and
- The Bigelow Preserve includes areas in both counties, with popular access points in Carrabassett Valley, Carrying Place Twp., and Stratton-Eustis.

Similar regional planning and development initiatives

Both counties would like to capitalize on their unique natural resources and rural setting to enhance tourism-related economic development in the planning area. Regional economic development initiatives that overlap both counties or are similar in both places include:

- The Maine Woods Consortium (e.g., initiatives such as the Recreation Destination program);
- Networks for tourism, arts, and other businesses or organizations; and
- Support for, and enhancement of, state and national scenic byways (routes 201, 4, 16, and 27).
- Both counties have pursued economic development strategies that emphasize quality of place and attraction of visitors to the planning area for recreation as a priority (e.g., Somerset County Economic Development Strategy, Androscoggin Valley Economic District Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, AVCOG Open Space Policy, and others).

Common challenges

Both Steering Committees have identified a similar set of socioeconomic issues that affect economic development in the planning area, which include: a decline in manufacturing jobs, aging population, and loss of youth because of lack of well-paying jobs. These challenges create strain for “hub communities”, and can lead to emigration and a decline in economic viability.

Common land use Issues:

1. Both Committees have discussed how the Commission’s adjacency principle may limit opportunities for development more than a mile from other existing development. This has implications for small businesses that are related to recreation, but may not offer lodging. While sporting camps and similar facilities often provide direct services for many different kinds of recreational experiences, the recent change in the Commission’s rules regarding recreational lodging facilities addressed many of the land use concerns around appropriately locating this kind of development. However, a facility providing services that support outdoor recreation, such as a small business renting canoes or kayaks or offering services for mountain bikers may also need to be located close to the recreational resource. Currently this may not be possible in some locations because of the Commission’s application of the adjacency principle.
2. Both committees have expressed the desire to increase the predictability of the rezoning process. The Franklin committee discussed the need to enhance regulatory coordination in review of projects by coordinating and streamlining communications with applicants. This would facilitate the process and increase the predictability of outcomes for applicants. The Somerset Committee discussed a similar issue and that increased predictability may encourage proposals for new development. They also discussed how a new subdistrict might address this by further defining where certain kinds of recreational development would be appropriate and approvable in a rezoning petition.
3. Both committees expressed a desire to increase flexibility for landowners and would like to ensure that recreational demand is adequately assessed to accommodate future needs. The Somerset committee discussed performance-based approaches to zoning and how they can regulate activities, rather than regulating uses through the traditional use listing approach. The Franklin Committee acknowledged that outdoor recreation demand is dynamic and can change quickly. They wanted to ensure that any changes would not tie the hands of future user groups that may be unforeseen at this time. A performance-based approach looks at the impacts of specific activities and doesn’t try to define which uses are allowed or not allowed in a subdistrict. This would potentially allow for future unforeseen uses so long as they did not create too great an impact on existing uses.