**Placemaking Progress**

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The Maine Department of Transportation has a long history of successfully partnering with local communities to develop programs and deliver projects that bring out a combined vision and accentuate shared priorities. The newest MaineDOT community-based initiative is our Village Partnership Initiative (VPI). Launched in 2022, this program aims to work with community partners to make once-in-a-lifetime investments in Maine’s iconic downtown and village areas, where people meet, walk, shop, and do business on a human scale.

We are already making progress with these placemaking endeavors. Several have received discretionary federal funding awards, allowing us to move forward with design work on the first major projects that will be classified as a MaineDOT VPI.

Downtown Sanford Revitalization

The first Village Partnership Initiative to receive a federal funding award was our project with the City of Sanford to revitalize the city’s downtown area. The U.S. Department of Transportation awarded this initiative a $25-million Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) Grant in August 2022.

VHB is working through the the design process for the project. The project will involve rebuilding parts of Cottage Street (Route 202), William Oscar Emery Drive, Main Street (Route 109), Washington Street, and School Street in downtown Sanford. There will also be upgrades to downtown crosswalks, drainage, intersections, landscaping, lighting, parking spaces, and sidewalks. This project will be the poster child for how collaborative work and targeted investments can transform a downtown area.

North Windham Moves

MaineDOT is also working with VHB on design work for a project aimed at improving safety and mobility in North Windham. This project was awarded a U.S. DOT RAISE Grant worth $25 million in June 2023.

There are inefficiencies on the Route 302 corridor in North Windham. This Village Partnership Initiative will create connector roads on the east and west sides of the highway. These roads will allow business-access points away from the busy highway traffic. Route 302 will remain a four-lane highway, but it will feature new medians, turning pockets, and signals to improve safe movement for all roadway users. This project will also add a multiuse trail.

Municipalities west of Portland are growing. Communities like Windham are experiencing increases in construction and traffic. The North Windham Moves VPI will help keep people moving safely and efficiently while supporting economic opportunity along the Route 302 corridor. These improvements will benefit transportation system users whether they are commuting to a job in Portland or making their way toward the Sebago Lakes region for a weekend visit.

Portland’s Historic Libbytown

In March, the U.S. DOT awarded a $22.4-million Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Program Grant to a Village Partnership Initiative in the City of Portland. This project will reconnect the historic Libbytown neighborhood while improving traffic flow and safety in a busy section of Maine’s largest city.

After learning that the owners of the former Denny’s restaurant on Congress Street were looking to sell the property, MaineDOT acquired it last year. That area will be turned into a roundabout to control traffic flowing between I-295 and Park and Congress Streets, which will turn into two-way streets. TYLin is working through the design process for the project. This VPI will also involve new drainage, sidewalks, and streetlights. The area will feature multiuse paths with dedicated bike tracks. CSX will also be upgrading the nearby rail crossing, which is used by the Amtrak Downeaster.

Portland’s Libbytown was the center of a small but thriving business district before the construction of I-295 in the 1960s. As was the case in many parts of the country, the interstate construction resulted in the destruction of this neighborhood: more than 15 businesses and 200 families were displaced. This new project seeks to remove some of the physical barriers that still exist in this part of Portland and build new connections to foster economic opportunity and quality of life.

In addition to these projects, Village Partnership Initiatives in Livermore Falls and Biddeford have received Congressional Directed Spending funds. There are also dozens of planning efforts throughout Maine that could result in future VPI projects.

Transformative projects always pose challenges in terms of constructability. We hope residents, business owners, and other stakeholders understand the long-term benefits of the short-term headaches. Past downtown improvements made in places like Ogunquit, Hallowell, and Belgrade have proven to be economic shots in the arm for those municipalities.

The goal of MaineDOT’s Village Partnership Initiative is to enhance the transportation components of the places in Maine that make our state special. The projects mentioned above represent approximately $90 million in federal funding being invested in Maine. This is the result of the strong partnerships between MaineDOT and its municipal partners. Together, we can continue to work reimagine Maine’s iconic downtown and village areas.