

Council on Rural Economic Transformation (CRET)

Kick-off Meeting — Minutes

August 20, 2026 | Maine Office of Community Affairs, Augusta (Hybrid)

Attendees

MDF: Rosie Vanadestine (Chair), Sylvie Piquet, Anne Ball. MOCA/DRAC: Marina Tomer. DECD: Deborah Johnson (virtually). Maine Community College System: Charlie Collins (virtually). Maine Redevelopment Land Bank Authority: Gabe Gauvin, Jenn Litteral. Grow Smart Maine: Harald Bredezen. Eastern Maine Community College: Debora Rountree. Town of Jay: Shiloh LaFreniere. Maine Outdoor Brands: Jenny Kordick. Town of Orono: EJ Roach. Town of Lisbon: Ross Cunningham. North Star Planning: Ben Smith. Sanford Regional Economic Growth Council: Keith McBride. Maine & Co.: Ashley Pringle (virtually). Central Maine Growth Council: Garvan Donegan (virtually). Sunrise County Economic Council: Denise Cilley (virtually).

1. Welcome & Introductions

Members introduced themselves, their organizations, and their role on CRET, followed by a brief icebreaker on summer highlights. The group represents a broad cross-section of state agencies, regional economic development organizations, municipalities, community colleges, and nonprofits.

2. Thriving Community Model (TCM) Overview — Rosie Vanadestine, MDF

- MDF is a nonprofit, public/private membership organization created by the Legislature in 1978 — not a state agency, though it reports annually to the state.
- TCM has been in development since 2019 and is now funded by a 43-month, \$500,000 NBRC grant, supported by MDF, DECD, MOCA, and Maine Redevelopment; the grant is focused on biomass supply chain communities.
- Rationale: rural communities often lack capacity, leadership bandwidth, and awareness of available resources; TCM aims to connect communities to state/regional resources and "meet communities where they are."
- Approach: cross-sector collaboration, broad community assessment (data-driven baselines), a prioritized community action plan, a connected service-provider network, and leadership training (two leaders per community through the Institute for Civic Leadership).
- Four communities will be selected via a Competitive Application Process (starting with a low-barrier Letter of Intent). Each selected community receives \$5,000 for planning and \$50,000 toward implementation of a priority project, with no local funding match required.
- "Rural" is defined per NBRC distressed-community criteria; eligibility is intentionally broad (not limited strictly to biomass-dependent communities).
- CRET's work also connects to MDF's separate Strategy G / Hubs of Excellence initiative and a recently completed Maine Community Collaborative Impact Hubs (MCCIH) pilot with the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and partnered with Maine Alliance for Health & Prosperity.
- Longer-term vision: CRET evolves into an ongoing think tank, convenes a funders' forum after the first two communities, and explores a future fellows program for community capacity-building.

3. DRAC Role & Statutory Framework — Marina Tomer, MOCA

- DRAC (Development Ready Advisory Committee) is a statewide, statutorily established, cross-sector committee housed at MOCA, launched in January 2026, focused on helping communities pursue sustainable, coordinated development.
- DRAC oversees three working groups: Development Readiness Toolkit, Incentives/Alignment & Finance, and Policy & Regulatory Problem-Solving; CRET (external working group) operates with similar two-way reporting to DRAC and managed by MDF.
- DRAC meets quarterly; working groups run six-month sprints with monthly meetings and report recommendations back to the full committee.
- Meetings are open to the public and posted on MOCA's DRAC webpage, with a public comment period.
- Potential alignment opportunity noted between CRET's community assessment (development-readiness section) and the Development Readiness Toolkit working group.

4. CRET Formation — Anne Ball, MDF

- Scope/timeline: back-end research and document development underway now; public outreach and webinars begin October; first round of two communities selected in December; a second round follows roughly 3–4 months later using lessons learned; rounds run concurrently within a roughly 3.5-year overall window.
- Three subgroups will be formed: (1) Application & Review — develops the LOI and Application and reviews applications; (2) Community Assessment — refines the assessment tool; (3) Data & Evaluation — identifies data gaps and sets up evaluation across project phases. Participation is flexible; all members can review and comment even if not on a subgroup.

- Group norms (aligned with DRAC's existing norms) will be circulated by email for member feedback.

5. Initial Design Discussion: What Should TCM Include?

Extensive discussion on required community capacity, covering:

- Capacity: assistance should help communities build the right local team creatively (not necessarily new staff), with ongoing project-management-style guidance/check-ins to keep momentum; local partners (e.g., regional COGs, economic development entities) can supplement thin municipal capacity.
- Selection: no financial match required from communities; scoring will consider recent grant funding received (to diversify which communities benefit) and may balance "easier" versus more challenging/test-case communities, with a backup/"on-deck" community identified in case of dropout.
- Existing plans: TCM will review any existing community plans/reports to identify themes rather than duplicating planning work; projects and budgets must be feasible within the ~18-month window, with committed funding sources shown for any project costing more than the \$50,000 award.
- Alignment & sustainability: applications should describe alignment with state development goals; sustainability/feasibility of each investment will be a standing discussion item at future meetings.
- Other suggestions: consider communities already enrolled in the Community Resilience Partnership; share cross-community lessons learned publicly/with DRAC over time; clarify outreach/encouragement strategy so municipalities understand the opportunity's value.

6. Next Steps & Assignments

- MDF to circulate subgroup descriptions and open sign-up for the Application & Review, Community Assessment, and Data & Evaluation subgroups via email.
- Members to review and provide feedback on the draft LOI and Application and application materials as they are shared.
- MDF to share the state economic development plan/goals with the group for reference.
- Members to flag any additional organizations or individuals who should be invited to CRET.
- Starting in October, the group will meet the first Monday of the month, 2:00–4:00 PM, primarily virtual with an in-person meeting location at MOCA offices.

7. Closing

Rosie Vanadestine thanked members for their engagement and encouraged follow-up questions or input by email as the group's materials and subgroup structure are finalized before the September meeting.