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**Building a Better Maine**

GrowSmart Maine is honored to be a part of this conversation, highlighting the impacts of the ARPA, BIL, and IRA investments in Maine communities. As Maine's USDA-designated State Rural Development Council, we support communities as they navigate change in alignment with smart growth.

- As in so many parts of the country, Maine's public transportation agencies are struggling with looming budget shortfalls resulting from inflation and workforce costs, and the coming loss of COVID-relief funds. Though the larger agencies in Southern Maine are better positioned to endure the fiscal cliff, the small and rural providers are not. For KVCAP in the Augusta area, ARPA funds allowed free or reduced fares to offer safe and reliable transportation. For one man who works as a short order cook in Augusta, the KVCAP director worked with the man's boss to coordinate his work hours with their limited hours.
- MaineDOT deployed \$5M of ARPA funds for Workforce Transportation Pilot. As one example, Robbins Lumber got access to \$47,000 to serve their workers.
- As the global food system is increasingly under stress from the impact of climate change and unrest, federal investments in a resilient agricultural system is as important as ever. In Maine, Governor Mills has set the ambitious goal to increase the amount of food consumed in Maine from state food producers from 10% in 2020 to 20% by 2025 and 30% by 2030 through local food system development. The strong partnership with the federal government is essential to make this happen. Examples of this include:
  - 1) In 2022, Wolves Neck Center for Agriculture and the Environment in Freeport, Maine, and its partners was awarded up to \$35 million from USDA's **Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities** program to support the adoption of climate smart agricultural practices on farms nationwide. This is a part of a USDA investment of more than \$3.1 billion for 141 projects across the country to make climate smart agricultural knowledge accessible at all scales across diverse production systems.

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- 2) Also in 2022, with funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the Mills Administration invested approximately \$20 million to help Maine farmers and food processors improve critical infrastructure. The **Agricultural Infrastructure Investment Program** provided awards to 64 agricultural businesses enabling upgrades that mitigated the adverse effects of COVID-19, increased the supply of Maine-grown food, enhanced supply chain resilience, and helped grow and sustain one of Maine's heritage industries. As an example, Tide Mill Farm, a certified organic farm and food hub in Washington County, close to the Canadian border, used their grant to upgrade their organic poultry processing plant to become a State-Inspected Processing Facility and develop value-added products, such as ground turkey and chicken, poultry sausages, and pet food.
  - 3) The USDA is currently partnering with State Departments of Agriculture across the country to deliver \$420 million of American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funding through the **Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) program**. This program, now being rolled out in Maine, will improve middle-of-the-supply-chain challenges within Maine's many specialty agricultural products such as blueberries and aquaculture. We greatly appreciate these meaningful investments in keeping Maine's rural communities and local food systems thriving.
- The infusion of federal dollars to support first-ever digital equity programs in libraries and other non-profits has had a significant positive impact. As one example from our Kennebec County Broadband Partnership, the Dr. Shaw Memorial Library Tech Help Program in Mount Vernon, a town of 2200 people, offers weekly one-on-one tech help with a paid community member. After receiving this help to learn to use Zoom, a 76-year-old woman was able to join a weekly online gathering with her friends from middle school who live all over the country and still stay in touch! This kind of online connection reduces social isolation among seniors.
  - It is worth noting as well that the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) helps the public-private partnership concept of BEAD and ARPA actually work. The model depends on participation from all households. If low income folks don't connect, the private sector won't be able to justify investing in the infrastructure, and they won't access the federal grants to build in remote, rural areas.

- Maine has received over \$41 million in federal funding over the past 3 years (including \$8 million from the American Rescue Plan, the rest from BIL and IRA) to expand our EV charging network with fast-charging and locally-accessible level 2 charging stations.
- In my hometown of Ellsworth, where I serve as City Councilor, \$375K of BIL funds through the Clean Water Revolving Loan Fund. There is no more fundamental economic catalyst than safe drinking water!
- The National Scenic Byways Program at Federal Highway Administration spurred application for several project proposals in the Downeast Maine National Heritage Area. These projects are in Sullivan, Cherryfield, and Calais. For Cherryfield and Calais, if funded, a Scenic Byway investment would absolutely transform these downtowns! “The opportunity has renewed excitement and a sense of possibility to achieve these larger infrastructure projects. To me, this is the most important first step - belief that we can make things happen and that others see the value in it.” This from Crystal Hitchings at Sunrise County Economic Council.
- In Rumford the investments made under ARPA, IRA and the BIL are providing the fiscal stability necessary for projects to move forward with confidence. This includes investments in solar and wind renewable energy, battery energy storage systems, transportation infrastructure investment, and public safety and community facilities construction. “There is no substitute for the certainty a measure of federal backing provides for projects that are breaking new ground and supporting economic diversification. This confidence has manifested regularly in our election and Town meeting results, which show solid public support for projects requiring local resources. It is a sea-change in circumstances from even five years ago.” That from Rumford’s Economic Development Director, George O’Keefe.
- Within GrowSmart’s own work, [Building Community Strength](#) supports direct community technical assistance to prepare those small towns lacking resources to apply for federal programs through which they will meet the interlinked challenges of housing, economic development, farmland protection and climate impacts. Through the [USDA:Rural Development Rural Community Development Initiative](#), GrowSmart Maine has launched this three year commitment of financial and technical assistance to ten communities in the northern half of Maine, as they identify local assets and projects, develop strategic plans, and access necessary funding. By design, this program builds local capacity that will continue to serve communities beyond the span of the program.
- The USDA:Rural Development [Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training](#) is another opportunity to assist the communities who have joined Building Community Strength in identifying and applying for relevant federal funding from these programs for locally-identified community facilities investments.

- On a recent Sunday morning hike, I came upon this sign noting the National Park Service investment of BIL funds to restore the popular 100-acre Great Meadow wetland by replacing or installing culverts, building raised boardwalks, managing invasive plants, planting native plants, and remediating man-made landscape alterations. The project will also improve fish passage and restore and measurably reduce flooding of trails. This restoration will ensure the personal wellness and regional economic benefits of continued access to outdoor recreational places for local residents and visitors.



***Maine's communities are stepping up to the current challenges of climate change and the opportunities that come with the recent influx of people who, once realizing they can live anywhere, are choosing to come live in Maine.***

Through our direct technical assistance and online resources, as well as our convenings and advocacy, GrowSmart Maine is supporting communities in improving people's everyday lives while building capacity and optimism for the future.

Thank you for this opportunity to share just a few examples of the benefits Mainers are seeing from the ARPA, IRA, and BIL investments.

With appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nancy E. Smith".

Chief Executive Officer