



GrowSmart Maine

Annual Report: Fiscal Year 2024



Smart Land Use is when people feel:

- We are safe**
 - We:
 - Have enough healthful food
 - Have an affordable and welcoming place to live
 - Have clean air, land, and water
- We can thrive**
 - We:
 - Can take time for creative and meaningful activities
 - Can imagine a positive future
 - Can benefit from economic opportunity
- We belong**
 - We:
 - Find places where they can gather with friends and neighbors
 - Find opportunities to help shape their communities
 - Find fellowship within the diversity of their neighborhoods



JULY 1, 2023 – JUNE 30, 2024

GrowSmart Maine marks our 20th anniversary this year. From an original “anti-sprawl” focus to the 2006 release of the Brookings Report, “Charting Maine’s Future,” then transitioning to advocacy and direct community engagement. We continue to target our programming on supporting communities as they navigate change.

As Mainers seek to connect with their neighbors on land use issues, we share two important facts. First, that change is happening and the wish for things to stay the same will not, cannot, be realized. Smart land use planning allows residents to determine what that change will be. Secondly, for any business to succeed, it must have a plan. So it’s only natural that we develop a plan for our community to succeed as well.

Our programming supports local and state-level policies, plans, and projects communities where we feel that we are safe, we belong, and we can thrive in our communities.

Partners for Rural America: Through our USDA designation as Maine’s Rural Development Council, we co-hosted with Vermont the 2023 annual convening of a dozen peer organizations, as we shared best practices, lessons learned, and upcoming challenges.

Our community outreach is much improved with the addition of a land use planner on staff, adding to the program management and communications expertise added to our capacity in the prior year.

In addition to the programming we report on here, GrowSmart is advancing our mission through fiscal sponsorships and support of up and coming partnerships, including Moving Maine Network, Maine Broadband Coalition, and Mainers for Smarter Transportation. Each of these initiatives takes a deeper step into one component of smart growth while expanding capacity and developing expertise across Maine.

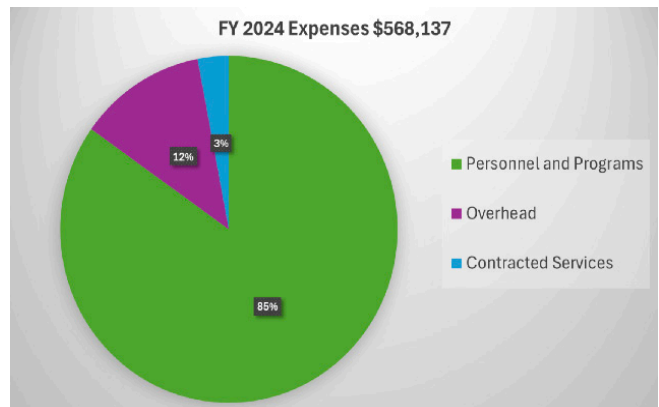
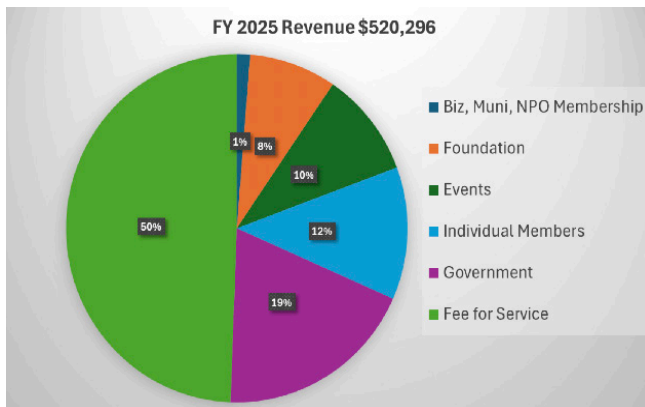
This is a time of opportunity, as more people appreciate what is at stake for our towns and cities, for Maine, and for the world, and acknowledge that we must implement smart growth; where housing strategies consider transportation choices, economic development aligns with strategic protection of open and productive lands, and the well-being of all residents is valued.

Thank you to our engaged board, which grew substantially this year, our partner communities and resource organizations, our individual, business, non-profit and municipal members and philanthropic partners, and especially our staff. We have created a team where each person focuses on their area of expertise, while we share ideas and resources for overall best outcomes.

Nancy E Smith



GrowSmart Maine staff, back row L to R: Harald Bredesen, Program Director; Dayea Shim, Program Coordinator; Joe Oliva, Outreach and Communications Director; Amanda Vermillion, Development and Operations Associate. Front row: Hildie Lipson, Kennebec Broadband Partnership Director; Nancy Smith, CEO.



Financial Report:

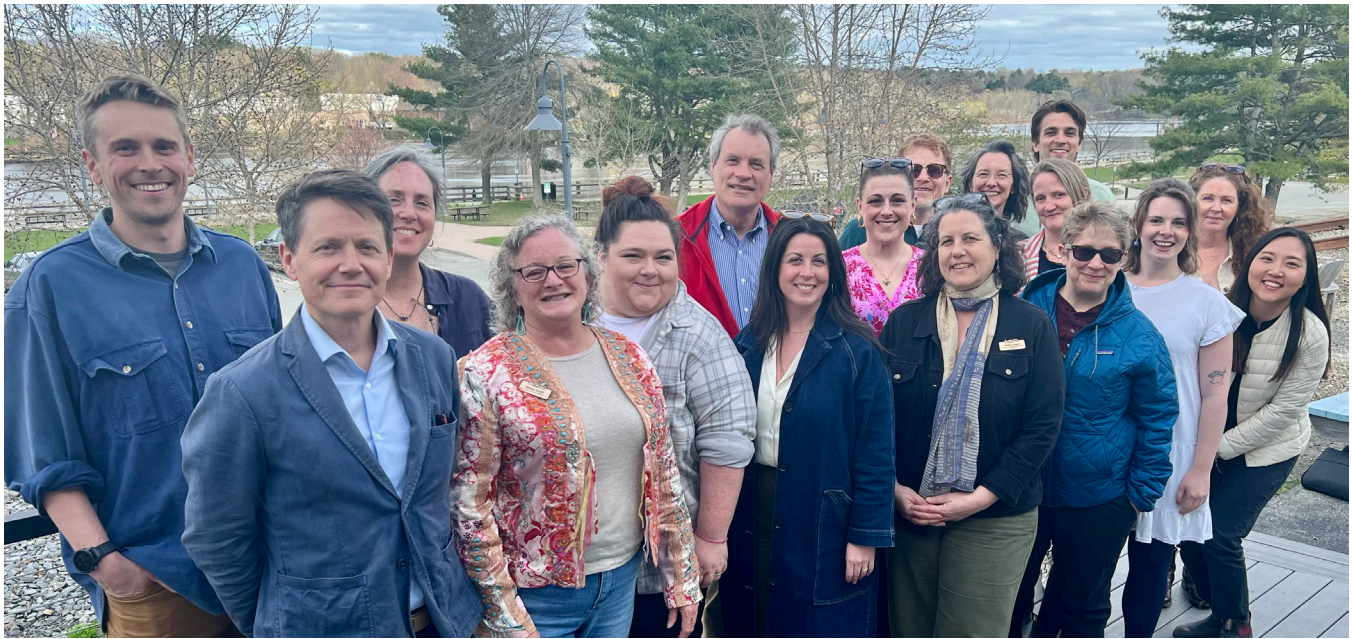
FY 2024 financials reflect a second year of significant growth for GrowSmart Maine. With the addition of a land use planner, we now have a team of six staff members, and have expanded our programming while honoring new and long time partnerships.

Fee for Service is our largest revenue source and reflects agreements with American Farmland Trust for Planning for Agriculture, and Maine Connectivity Authority for the Kennebec Broadband Partnership. Government Contracts with USDA, Rural Development, Maine Dept of Economic and Community Development/Housing Opportunity Program, and Governor's Office of Program Innovation and the Future/Community

Resilience Partnership support our direct community engagement in over twenty communities across Maine.

With additional expertise and capacity on staff, contracted expenses were reduced. With significant internal resources now dedicated to delivering programs across the state, Personnel and Programming represent the majority of GrowSmart Maine's expenses.

Operational reserves covered the short-term underperformance to budget due to the timing of contracted revenue receipts.



GrowSmart Board and Staff, May 2024.



Harald Bredesen presenting at the first Building Community Strength workshop in Bangor.



GrowSmart CEO Nancy Smith (center), with USDA, Rural Development Under Secretary Dr. Basil Gooden (left) and Rhiannon Hampson, State Director for Maine USDA, Rural Development (right)

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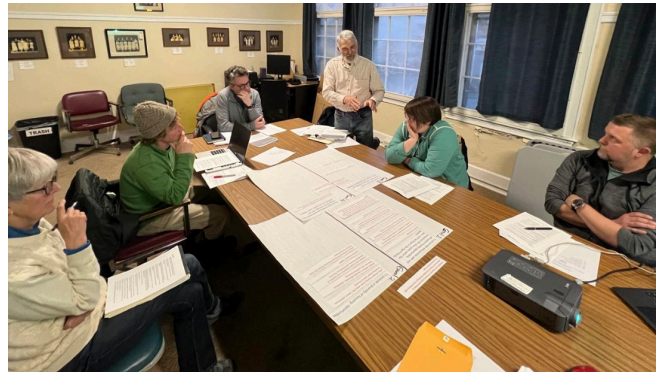
OUR WORK AND ITS IMPACT

PLANNING FOR AGRICULTURE

In October, 2022, GrowSmart Maine entered into the long-term “Planning for Ag” partnership with the American Farmland Trust in response to the alarming rate of farmland loss in Maine and across America to “low-density residential development” or sprawl. Through the partnership, GrowSmart Maine helps communities address the housing crisis, without undoing the good work to address the climate crisis, and without creating the next crisis of access to farmland and food. The partnership has provided a framework to broaden our partnerships, expand our portfolio of community programs, and strengthen our capacity with the recruitment of Dayea Shim, AICP, as our new Program Coordinator.

The Community Resilience Partnership

GrowSmart Maine is a service provider for the Community Resilience Partnership. The program was established by the Governor’s Office for Policy Innovation and the Future as a part of the implementation of Maine Won’t Wait, Maine’s four-year climate action plan. GrowSmart Maine supports municipalities to enroll in the program and apply for funding through the Community Action Grant. We secured grants to help enroll four rural towns in central Maine - Mount Vernon, Rome, Vienna and Wayne - facilitating community workshops and the identification of local challenges and priority actions.



Bowdoinham residents hard at work on an updated Comprehensive Plan.

The Housing Opportunity Program

The Housing Opportunity Program was established within the Department of Economic & Community Development to encourage and support the development of additional housing units in the state. GrowSmart Maine received a grant through the program and has been working with the Town of Bowdoinham on their update of the Comprehensive Plan, with a focus on Housing, Agriculture and Future Land Use. Technical assistance to revised land use ordinances was also provided. While the proposed ordinance changes did not pass at this stage, the updated Comprehensive Plan was adopted by the Town Meeting. We continue to provide technical assistance to the implementation of the plan. In addition, a series of statewide educational materials were developed as a part of the Housing Opportunity Program. This includes webinars on Accessory Dwelling Units, Short Term Rentals, Farming and Housing, as well as Community Guides.



Presentation at the first Building Community Strength workshop in Bangor.

OUR WORK AND ITS IMPACT

Building Community Strength

With funding from USDA Rural Development and the American Farmland Trust, the three-year program “Building Community Strength” was launched at the GrowSmart Maine Summit October 2023. The program is a response to the inter-linked challenges facing rural communities across Maine. Trainees from ten participating municipalities tackle issues such as climate resilience, economic development, farm viability and farmland protection, affordable housing, and equitable and inclusive community development. The program also trains participants in researching and applying for state, federal, and private funding.

In April 2024, the first cohort convened for a multi-day workshop in Bangor. Fourteen town managers, select board members, economic development directors, from participating towns gathered to network and learn from each other. They met with GrowSmart Maine staff and other partners (including Sunrise County Economic Council, Eastern Maine Development Cooperation, North Star Planning, and the Musson Group) to participate in a series of sessions focused on community planning. At the workshop, the representatives of each community also had a chance to meet with state and federal officials through a “speed-dating” session, giving the community leaders the chance to outline their priorities in one-on-one conversations.

While the program offers technical assistance, funding and training, a key component is the development of networks among towns. “I had conversations with the different community leaders on a range of topics,” said Tim St. Peter of Presque Isle. “If I can learn from someone else what to watch for and avoid, or what process worked for them and be able to apply it to our community, I think that is a success.” The towns enrolled in the Building Community Strength program are situated across the state: Calais, Danforth, Enfield, Houlton, Machias, Mexico, Presque Isle, Roque Bluffs, Skowhegan, and Van Buren.

KENNEBEC BROADBAND PARTNERSHIP

The second year of the Kennebec Broadband Partnership (KBP) began in December 2023. We continued our work from Year 1 and added new programs to help bridge the digital divide in Kennebec County.

The KBP, funded by the Maine Connectivity Authority, the state entity responsible for bringing broadband

infrastructure to all areas of Maine, is dedicated to helping people in Kennebec County access broadband and digital literacy skills.

This past year GrowSmart Maine planned and coordinated with the Digital Navigator for Kennebec County to create programs to bring tech help to several libraries in the area, helping people get answers to tech questions. GrowSmart Maine also implemented a Digital Equity Stipend Fund to help build the capacity of libraries and other nonprofits to provide digital literacy programs and services. The Digital Equity Stipend Committee awarded stipends of up to \$5,000 to 10 organizations including 6 libraries and 4 nonprofit organizations. They used these funds to purchase computers for public use and loanable accessible technology equipment, furniture and equipment for use in libraries, devices for people in re-entry, support for the promotion of digital literacy programs, and to provide stipends for survivors of domestic violence to obtain internet in a new dwelling.

Together with the Digital Navigator, GrowSmart Maine worked with Age-Friendly groups in Kennebec County, focusing on providing information to avoid frauds and scams and helping to coordinate the offering of group tech classes.

Our work is dedicated to serving eight target populations: people with disabilities, veterans, ethnic and racial minorities, people with low income, those with low literacy skills, older adults, formerly incarcerated people, and rural residents. The KBP is guided by the Kennebec Digital Equity Working Group, whose members represent organizations and individuals of the targeted populations we seek to reach. We work to help meet Maine’s Digital Equity Plan which strives to ensure that every person in our state will have equitable access to the digital world.



Calvin Lewis, Kennebec County Digital Navigator, conducting a presentation to Litchfield Senior Center members about available digital literacy resources.

OUR WORK AND ITS IMPACT

ADVOCACY

Much of our advocacy is focused at the state level, while we support federal initiatives in partnerships, and host local and regional advocacy with statewide impact.

STATE LEVEL POLICY:

Policy Action 2023 is a crowdsourcing of legislative proposals through the 131st Legislature, which convened in 2023 and 2024. Co-lead with Build Maine, our goal is to address barriers to and create incentives for equitable, sustainable growth and development that strengthens downtowns and villages of all sizes while pulling development pressure away from productive and open nature areas. We do so acknowledging that Maine has urban, rural, and suburban settings for which any solution may or may not be a fit, and a variety of people who deserve to feel welcomed in their communities.

Success is measured in successful legislation, but also in hosting necessary and difficult conversations, building advocacy capacity in our allies while expanding relationships within our network. The outcomes for all bills are found here: bit.ly/PA23Scorecard

Policy Action 2025: With lessons learned from Policy Action 2023, we hosted another set of open meetings to develop priority actions for Policy Action 2025, for the 132nd Legislature which will convene in 2025 and 2026. You can review the full Policy Action evaluation here: bit.ly/PAEval and be a part of Policy Action 2025 here: bit.ly/PolicyAction25

Planning for Ag is our advocacy that prioritizes farmland protection and farm viability as essential smart growth outcomes equal to and directly related to directing growth to where development makes sense for the long term. GrowSmart tracked fourteen bills and provided testimony on nine of these proposals, including the supplemental budget. You can learn more about the bills and outcomes here: bit.ly/P4APolicy

LOCAL/REGIONAL ADVOCACY:

Mainers for Smarter Transportation is a group of individuals and organizations working to protect the character of our communities and develop smart alternatives to address traffic in greater Portland. Since its inception in May 2024, M4ST has been focused on defeating the Maine Turnpike Authority highway expansion in Gorham, and presenting more effective and long lasting solutions in a recently released White Paper. You can learn more about these efforts here: <https://m4st.org/>

FEDERAL ADVOCACY

GrowSmart's CEO was invited to a March 2024 White House Briefing on Building a Better Maine, highlighting the impact of the ARPA, BIL, and IRA investments in Maine communities. As a dozen Mainers and nearly a hundred other state-level leaders from across the country, we focused our comments on investments in transportation including transit and a workforce transportation pilot, local food systems and agriculture infrastructure, digital equity and much more, including the Downeast Maine National Heritage Area. Read it here: bit.ly/GrowSmartMaineWhiteHouseBriefing2024



Policy Action 2025 discussions at Build Maine in Skowhegan.

OUR WORK AND ITS IMPACT

CONVENING TO ACTION

WEBINARS

We held four webinars in FY2024, the majority of which focused on the hottest topic in the state - housing. Maine communities of all shapes and sizes are grappling with an ever-increasing housing shortage and the corresponding pressures associated with accommodating current and future residents. Webinars proved to be a valuable tool for platforming conversations about housing within the context of smart growth - acknowledging that while creating more housing must be a priority, striving for that end need not come at the cost of compromising on our shared environmental goals, including the preservation of Maine's farmland.

How To Make Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) Work For Your Community?

Panelists: Chris Lee (Backyard ADUs), Chelsea Torrey (Town and Country Federal Credit Union), Jon Boynton (Belfast), Eli Rubin (South Portland)

Our featured speakers provided in-depth knowledge and practical advice on how ADUs can address housing challenges, promote affordability, and enhance the quality of life for individuals and communities alike.

Short Term Rentals – Boon, Bane or Both?

Panelists: Noel Musson (The Musson Group), Michael Roy (Greenville), Tim Carr (Land Use Planning Commission)

Our panelists engaged in a rich discussion around the costs and benefits of short term rentals in communities around Maine and raise awareness of the trends and tools available to manage them.

Creating Community: Farming and Housing.

Panelists: David Asmussen (Bowdoinham), Rep. Kathy Shaw (Auburn), Jeremy Kasten (Berwick)

This webinar addressed how local communities can address this dual challenge: how can Maine's communities promote farm viability and farmland protection through municipal planning, while also enabling housing and growth? What were the lessons-learned and how can these inform discussions in other communities tackling these issues?

Smart Growth for Small Communities.

Panelists: Luke Dyer (Van Buren), Claire Emrick (Center for an Ecology-Based Economy), Tanya Rucosky (Sunrise County Economic Council)

This webinar highlighted the organizations, activities, and people who help create healthy, happy, and thriving small communities across Maine.

All forums are available on the GrowSmart Maine YouTube channel or by going to the "Webinars" page on our website, growsmartmaine.org.

COMMUNITY GUIDES

Nearly three hundred Community Guides were downloaded from our website in FY24. On trend with the larger conversation across the state and in the Statehouse, our two most downloaded Community Guides relate to Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and Housing. Our strategy of pairing Community Guide releases with newsletters, webinars, and other relevant activities drove audiences to our resource library of over twenty-five Guides across a wide range of topics.

Similarly, Community Guides related to sprawl, smart growth, and transportation experienced an uptick in downloads when GSM became involved with opposition to the Gorham Connector project. Broadly speaking, total readership is significantly undercounted by downloads alone - tailored selections of Community Guides accompanied staff at events across the state and otherwise made their way into Mainers' hands through a variety of means.

SUMMIT 2023

At our 2023 board retreat, the board and staff dove deeply into the question, "why does smart growth matter?" until we articulated the key impact: smart growth creates places for personal connections. This led to the focus of our 2023 Annual Summit, Creating Places Connecting People, Building and Enhancing Places That Advance Community Resilience.

Jeremy Nobel, M.D., MPH, is the founder and president of The Foundation for Art & Healing, whose signature initiative, Project UnLonely, addresses the personal and public health challenges of loneliness and social isolation. As our national keynote speaker, he shared insights from his recently published book, Project UnLonely, and led an invigorating haiku-writing exercise. Professional land use planner Jane Lafleur then shared numerous images and stories of public spaces that allow us people to connect, as well as guidance on how to succeed in doing so. And for the first time, we followed the keynote discussion with Community Spotlights, where Mainers shared their own stories of how design and programming in small towns and cities create places for connecting people. City Experience Walking Tours and a networking reception rounded out our first Waterville-based Summit.

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