

The purpose of this report is to offer a strategy for applying network-based social collaboration principles and supporting tools to the socio-economic development objectives of the Maine Woods Consortium. The strategy focuses on elements pertaining to the governance structure for objective setting and investment decision making.

The report addresses five subjects:

- Current Constraints to Development Faced by Maine’s Woodland Communities
- Merits of Online Social Networks for Development
- Degrees of Governance and Participation
- Applying Network Based Principles to Development
- Next Steps to Establish Governance Model

Constraints to Development Faced by Maine’s Woodland Communities

Challenges to maintaining vibrant communities in northern Maine are common to many of America’s rural populations that have experienced declines in traditional industries, the flight of youth to greater opportunity in urban locations, diminishing sense of local culture, values, and history, and the ensuing repercussions of declining tax base and eroding infrastructure and assets.

The following constraints exasperate these challenges by impeding development activities:

Constraints faced by rural communities	Result of constraints
Geographic – widely disbursed population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Results in limiting meetings and coordination – Results in delayed communications – Results in uneven or fragmented knowledge sharing – Symptomatically, members of community may feel disenfranchised by lack of information and participation
Geographic – isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Results in added difficulty adopting latest development lessons and practices – Can result in communities incurring redundant costs to overcome what could be shared challenges
Labor - limited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Less people required to undertake more responsibilities; combined with the burden of commuting requirements to address geographic challenge also leaves less time to tackle additional responsibilities outside of home and work
Labor - expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Limited population requires often finding outside expertise to supplement community knowledge

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Symptomatic of these constraints, members of rural communities may feel disenfranchised as time and geographic constraints prevent participation in knowledge building and decision making. The result of which is inevitably limited support and participation adopting development investments and policies.

Reviewing these constraints in totality, a reemerging challenge surfaces in the form of limited or fragmented information flows critical to making smart and supported decisions. It is these challenges in particular where online social networks have much to offer to rectify these problems.

Merits of Online Social Networks for Development

Online social networks have several characteristics that make them well suited to supplement regional economic development activities and to, in part, alleviate challenges to progress faced by the smaller, geographically disbursed rural communities such as those prevalent throughout the Maine woodlands.

Among the characteristics valuable to community and regional development objectives, notable properties are:

Virtual collaboration. Ongoing work and interaction that does not require regular face-to-face interaction nor necessarily that all participants participate at the same time. Online workspaces that permit community members to contribute from where they are and within their own time constraints can have significant benefits for increased productivity and wider participation.

Coordination & resource maximization. Network model supports multiple objectives brought together through a single site. Effective network solutions recognize and accommodate the multiple “hats” that members wear. Effective solutions can serve to share announcements not only about the progress of development projects but also school closings, upcoming events, etc.

Increased scale. Through the collaboration and coordination possibilities presented by online networks, communities of the Maine Woods Consortium can better pool demand for goods or services commonly needed. Pooling demand can make better pricing possible and afford the communities access to programs or services they may otherwise be ineligible to receive or too small to manage.

Expanded community. Creating virtual access to the community can open possibilities for engaging resources physically outside the region to contribute to the Maine Woods Consortium development efforts. The expanded community can take the form of maintaining connections with the region’s youth who have left to pursue new opportunities. These same youth, with their expanded knowledge and networks outside of Maine can bring both valuable new resources and perspective back to communities they know well without having to be physically present. Similarly, with increased scale, the communities of the consortium have

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more ability to attract input from outside expertise, both in pooling resources to hire such expertise and to enable interaction remotely. It is also a means for developing deeper partnerships with private and public organizations with an interest in development efforts but may be hampered by distance challenges of working more consistently with rural communities.

Knowledge sharing. Online networks can serve the function of consolidating and sharing information evenly throughout a community. Making information that is used for deliberation easily available to all benefits coordination among communities and reduces redundancy among efforts. As repositories for information, online networks can also broaden support for development efforts through education and awareness.

Knowledge building. Unlike traditional models of knowledge sharing which are typically broadcast from limited points of view (e.g. newspaper and television), online networks enable two-way channels for knowledge building as the consumers of information can also serve as producers contributing to the knowledge and analysis. This creates a strong positive-feedback mechanism that increasingly strengthens a community's capacity as more members are engaged. It also lends to more relevant place-specific and timely information.

Transparency. Online social networks possess the capability to enhance transparent decision making processes and outcomes. The geographic and resource limitations of rural regions that lead to challenges for information sharing, can be misconstrued as overt attempts of regional leaders to control funding and development decision making. Creating open workflow procedures and knowledge sharing through online communities both alleviates feelings of disenfranchisement and promotes greater contributions from community members to aid leaders who may feel all responsibility is on their shoulders.

Participation. Online social networks can enable greater interaction among community members and increase options to participate in deliberations as well as decision making. Aside from the already discussed matter of enabling input from those constrained by distance or time, it also fosters greater input of varied points of view. Community members who may have very good ideas but tend not to share those ideas in a public setting if they are perceived as challengers of the status quo can more readily share their opinion without fear of castigation.

Degrees of Governance and Participation

Given the greatest strength of social networking tools is to improve information flows, addressing participation challenges is perhaps the greatest benefit of employing such methods for development. Use of social networks within the development process lifecycle can take several forms and be employed differently at each stage of the process, and for each activity. It is important to recognize strengths and weaknesses that come with different degrees of participation in decision making and how online networks can be utilized.

Citizen-centric, or mass participation. Concepts of pure democracy still maintain a strong foothold in New England. The benefit of allowing all to have their say is to foster broad support for

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ultimate decisions. The challenges, however, can be greater if time is a factor and moving from deliberation to decision is stalled. Also, there are noted challenges of “group think” resulting in the most popular decision option not necessarily being the best option. Social network tools such as polling and voting capabilities can prove valuable when used to gain a broader community perspective of desired options that may be initially derived from expert counsel.

Chosen decision makers, or “smartocracy”. In a “smartocracy” model, all constituents are asked to identify trusted peers in their community. Such a social mapping exercise identifies layers of possible representation within a community that may be engaged depending on the nature of a given task or decision. The layers broaden participation beyond the limits of elected officials, notably for objectives requiring more time and effort than officials have capacity to oversee, while at the same time ensuring lines of communication and participation throughout the broader community. Social networking tools can be used to identify such layers of representation who can assemble on a need-by-need basis within the online community to shepherd tasks with the broader constituency virtually.

Recognized experts. Recognized experts are typically assembled for cursory activities leading to decisions. Whether hand-picked or solicited through a competitive process, tasks of these experts are defined by one of the previously described groups. A challenge to using recognized experts is knowing many times what expertise is required. Social networks can support efforts to define subject matter needs and expand the possibilities of who can contribute by opening the dialogue and expanding who can contribute. Through a social network platform, other means for engaging experts are also made possible. Rather than just a traditional approach of a finite contract period to produce a defined report, experts may be engaged to be active members of the community to contribute on an ad hoc basis as traditional constituents might.

Applying Network Based Principles to Development

Given the above described challenges, properties and opportunities, where best can the procedures within the lifecycle of economic development be modified to benefit from online collaboration? To resolve, the following framework of development and its stages will be considered:



For each stage of the process, the recommended approach is:

1. Define the key activities of each stage
2. Understand challenges experienced completing each activity under current conditions/methods
3. Define the opportunities for applying network principles to an activity, degree of participation, and identify the online tools available to conduct the work

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While identified challenges are often applicable to more than a single stage and similarly, social network solutions can serve more than one purpose, the objective of the following is to illustrate how the Maine Woodlands Consortium can develop a governance process for its development agenda utilizing online networking capabilities. By examining all the activities that need to be undertaken to pursue a development agenda, and then identifying where and how online networking tools can be utilized, the consortium can devise a governance approach conducive to its structure and membership.

Stage 1:

Knowledge Building

Representative Activities

Current state surveys	Assemble and keep current knowledge regarding community assets (commercial and public), labor resources, growth trends, initiatives underway and relationships will be key reference materials used throughout the stages of development
Mappings	<i>Social mappings</i> - building relationship assessments used for “smartocracy” objectives <i>Resource & asset mapping</i> - make transparent where and to what extent resources exist within the consortium communities to benefit members of the community and outside expertise or potential investors needing to know what is available to build upon <i>Initiative mappings</i> - make transparent where existing or proposed projects cover to identify gaps and possibilities for future investments
Best practice monitoring	Monitor and store materials on efforts of other rural communities and relevant sector advances that will inform future deliberations on objective setting and investment possibilities
Relationship building	Identify and engage internal constituents and outside partner possibilities with vested interests in the ongoing vitality of consortium communities.

Current challenges

Included among the challenges to conducting these activities are:

Top-down research. Gathering current information pertinent to specific rural areas is a more costly endeavor than many local communities can afford. The result can lead to higher level assessments based on general census or other preexisting information that are not always current nor actionable.

Limited feedback systems. Methods for sharing knowledge tend to be limited to brief presentations at public meetings with limited efforts to collect and assimilate feedback due to time and cost constraints. Other means of sharing information tend to be broadcast methods such as newspaper reports where feedback is delayed and limited to only a few letters to the editor. The result is that research has a limited life span and knowledge acquired stagnates after its initial use.

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Redundancy. It can be difficult for one hand to know what the other is doing when it is difficult to share information due to time and resource constraints. Progress is hampered as communities have trouble learning from one another and recreate one another's efforts.

Limited usage. Contracted studies are often targeted to very specific needs with limited abilities to repurpose. Such research also tends to be defined by the requirements of a small number of decision makers and may not be broadly circulated. Repurposing research for future studies may require ferreting out limited physical copies that are dispersed throughout small communities and may not be known to exist among fellow towns, all leading to increased likelihood that initiatives will not be mutually reinforcing, and instead repetitive. Further, discreet knowledge building efforts conducted without a holistic planning approach result in a difficulty identifying knowledge gaps that remain. Combined with limited feedback mechanisms, decision makers must be guided by their isolated perspectives on what to tackle next.

Role for social networks and tools available

Several tools have been developed for online networks that can alleviate some of the challenges posed by the current challenges and methods available to members of the Maine Woods Consortium. Among these tools are:

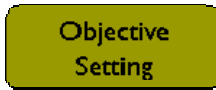
Shared document repositories. Online network applications, including the Joomla software platform currently utilized by the Maine Woods Consortium, have the capacity to store and share research with all members of the consortium, and to organize information according to subject matter, relevant locations, or other criteria members of the consortium deem appropriate.

Feedback tools. Unlike a traditional knowledge repository like a library, online social networks provide members to comment on and rate the value of stored information. With real-time interactive feedback, knowledge not only builds but also gains insightful dimensions that enable members to more effectively find the most relevant data for their interests. Decision makers can understand what issues are deemed most important to a community based on most viewed information and reader comments.

Real-time data gathering and analysis. Polling and voting tools integrated into online communities provide useful forum for gaining community input to investment options or development planning directions. Communities may also put forward research objectives and instructions to gain regional input from members of the network, thus spreading the workload and enabling more relevant and detailed information.

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Stage 2:



Representative Activities

Defining Objectives	Determine the Strategic Intent for participating communities in terms of what it means for them to be a vibrant community within a planning time horizon (e.g. ten years)
Blue Sky Brainstorming	Facilitate “out-of-the-box” thinking and discussion about what a community could look like in the foreseeable future
Assessing Feasibility	Examine possibilities against historical makeup of communities and anticipated micro and macro trends
Consensus Building	Winnowing objective options to a critical few to serve as focal points for goals and investments

Current challenges

Broad inclusion and buy-in. When investments are introduced without clear understanding of purpose and relationship to overall objectives, community support may wane leading to stalled progress or efforts to prevent necessary follow-on investments. Rallying communities around investments requires consistent and recurring communications that may typically only reach a self-selecting portion of the population able to make a town hearing. Others rely on word-of-mouth which tends to warp the original information, slanted towards the transmitter’s biases.

Regional integration. The challenge described above becomes far greater when attempting to combine the objectives of multiple communities. While coordination at the outset may be conceivable through concerted effort, progress may become splintered once work is underway and initial resources for coordination are exhausted.

Role for social networks and tools available

Wikis for “group think”. Wiki applications present a way for group members to jointly produce a shared document such as an objective charter. All members can propose revisions that can be subjected both to group voting or considered for adoption by a “smartocracy” subset.

Tagging. In group brainstorming exercises, such as seeking input from constituents about what is important to them as development objectives, once all ideas have been assembled (such as through a wiki or blog laundry list), the next challenge is to introduce a funneling method to combine like ideas and then focus in on those ideas deemed most important. Tagging is a way of performing both tasks at once. Objective ideas offered by members can be done so in the form of tags. The more frequently words are used to describe a desired objective, for example, the more prominent those words become in a laundry list. Activity facilitators can then combine like terms in order to reveal desired priorities.

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Stage 3:



Representative Activities

Defining Goals	Translate broad objective to specific goals to pursue over the course of the planning time horizon
Deciding Priorities	Set priority criteria and assign weight to defined goals for future ranking of investment possibilities
Defining Success Metrics	Choose metrics and means to monitor efforts to achieve chosen goals
Setting Timeframe	Determine order and desired timeframes for addressing goals
Determining Resource Requirements	Define the expertise and investments necessary to realize goals

Current challenges

Transparency of deliberation. While “group think” is not always effective at deriving an optimal solution and becomes increasingly cumbersome as activities become more tactical, a lack of transparent deliberations on how priorities are decided and resources allocated can raise unwarranted objections or cause confusion that may unnecessarily delay progress.

Role for social networks and tools available

Blogging and Forums. To augment physical meetings, online blogs and forums dedicated to meeting topics afford a larger population the opportunity to learn directly about the subject matter (reading attached meeting notes) and ongoing comments and discussion can ensue that are limited for reasons of meeting time limits or fear of speaking before an audience. It also gives presenters an opportunity to clarify proposals to dispel misperceptions and introduce improvements.

Virtual participation. Through a combination of media, it is also possible to combine blogging, forum and voting tools online with real-time broadcast of meeting events via community access television. This type of real-time interaction can aid decision makers by getting broad reactions to proposals quickly.

Workflow management. Process management can be made transparent and more tightly integrated by introducing workflow management tools to a social network platform. In social network applications, these applications can offer a comprehensive view of the entire lifecycle as well as discreet projects and integrate with supporting calendar and communication applications to provide customized viewing for each member depending on the nature of their participation at each stage and within each activity.

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Stage 4:



Representative Activities

Soliciting Proposals	Broadcasting invitations to deliver products or services sought for development goals
Evaluating Proposals	Distribution and rating of proposals based on previously established scoring metrics
Ranking Investment Options	Prioritizing investment options based on goals and objectives
Executing Investments	Contracting resources and managing investment portfolios

Current challenges

Transparency of deliberations. Decision making on how a community invests its limited resources can be contentious if there is real or perceived issues with the means for deriving conclusions. Given recurring time and resource constraints, communicating out and integrating feedback may be limited using traditional meeting and news broadcasting methods for building support for development plans and investments.

Regional integration. Under current conditions, integrating investments within a single community is already challenging. Broadening objectives to serve multiple communities therefore proves daunting when utilizing traditional face-to-face meeting and broadcast communication methods to develop consensus and integrate plans. The result may be great initial intentions with limited follow-through causing pessimism and loss of support for future efforts.

Role for social networks and tools available

Ranking and voting. Online ranking and voting applications when introduced into a social network and collaboration platform afford more broadly disbursed multi-community efforts to readily coordinated. Smartocracy members may do the initial preparation work and strategically solicit broader input in ranking and voting on investment options or overarching goals.

Mapping. Visual mapping techniques afford both planners and constituents the ability to understand implications for investments. For example, mapping regional population distribution overlaid with site possibilities for day care or education centers can provide planners the ability to optimize location decisions and offer constituents easy visibility into services available to them.

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Stage 5:



Representative Activities

Tracking Progress	Ongoing monitoring of investment project
Reporting Findings	Delivering feedback used to either modify investment plans or inform future plans
Soliciting Feedback	Determining utility of investments and actual impacts
Analysis & Knowledge Building	Assessing actual v. desired impact of investments and lessons learned for future endeavors

Current challenges

Limited evaluation metrics. Typically due to resource and time constraints, evaluation of investments focuses on whether the project was completed under budget and on time. Assessing the extent to which investments are utilized and the quality of work completed require additional time and resources that may not exist.

Intermittent tracking of progress. When only a project manager is responsible for tracking an investment's progress, and is also responsible for several other activities, tracking tends to devolve to assessing time factors of whether milestones are reached and collection of standardized final project reports. The challenge is that quality of work receives less attention and ability to change course mid-stream due to unforeseen opportunities or obstacles becomes less likely.

Role for social networks and tools available

Project spaces. Within a social network, project spaces can be established with its own discussion tools, shared documentation, and other applications that afford the broader community to monitor progress and provide feedback to project managers, effectively expanding the project managers abilities using the community as her eyes and ears. Ongoing monitoring and discussion will also benefit ongoing knowledge building to aid future deliberations on follow-on investments. Combined with workflow management tools, project spaces can serve as a focal point for community participation in an investment from initiation to sunset of the project.

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Next Steps to Establish Governance Model

1. Identify the key trusted peers among the affected communities to create regional social network map and identify layers of “smartocracy”. Performing this exercise early will identify communication channels gaps that can be addressed before becoming problematic.
2. Adopt the proposed approach with desired modifications. Identified smartocracy can initiate development and adoption of governance framework and necessary software platform applications.
3. Integrate lifecycle workflow, including steps for reviewing and modifying the governance process itself, and needed tools into nascent Joomla network solution (www.mainemountains.org)
4. Begin to engage the broader constituency in the process with the first activities of objective setting.

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