



Maine Mountain Heritage Network

Maine Mountain Public Facilities Development Initiative Report

Submitted October, 2007 to the Maine Department
of Economic and Community Development

Overview and Summary Recommendations

In 2004, the Maine Mountain Heritage Network (MMHN) put forward a plan for sustainable, asset-based economic development in the Maine Mountain region (Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, and Piscataquis Counties). Among other things, the plan proposed creation of a **regional system of information centers** as a way to support tourism development in the Maine Mountains.

This MMHN information system proposal was echoed by FERMATA, Inc. in its nature based tourism report (Attachment 1), issued in September, 2005. In June 2006, the Governor's Nature Based Tourism Task Force, appointed to implement the Fermata recommendations, endorsed the MMHN approach. (Attachment 2)

In 2006, the MMHN Knowledge Power team, the MMHN group most engaged in thinking about the Maine Mountain Heritage regional information center system, asked the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development to support a development project which would:

- Assess the needs and opportunities within local areas that were seeking to establish or sustain information centers.
- Identify potential approaches to planning, designing, financing, building, owning, and operating information centers that could be effective in these local areas.
- Determine the potential for communities to work together to leverage new outside resources to get facilities in place and operating.
- Create working relationships to support linking local centers into an integrated regional system.

With \$25,000 provided by DECD, Mountain Counties Heritage, Inc. undertook the project on behalf of the Maine Mountain Heritage Network. The project included

- A "current situation analysis" of local areas that wanted to be part of the project;
- Development of business plans for proposed centers;
- Formulation of new ideas to strengthen local and regional information management and communications capacity.

Throughout the project, the MMHN Knowledge Power team, comprised of representatives of communities and organizations operating or proposing information centers, has guided the process and has provided information and feedback. The team now supports recommendations being put forward in this report.

Summary recommendations are as follows:

1. Develop “**no wrong door**” **information networks** within service areas (chamber of commerce service areas or counties) which link existing knowledge sources with potential “customers” - and eventual integration of these information networks into more comprehensive tourism production networks in these areas.
2. Design and deploy an **Internet-based kiosk system** that allows information input and output at existing and new information centers across the region.
3. Continue to refine **plans for new information and interpretive centers** at key locations throughout the Maine Mountain region where there is local support and demonstrated need for these facilities.
4. Establish a **regional capital campaign** to raise funds required to build centers that have established business plans and local support.

Background: Maine Mountain Heritage Network

In 2000, Mountain Counties Heritage, Inc (MCH) convened interested organizations to initiate a comprehensive and coordinated approach to heritage-based development across Maine's mountain region (Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Piscataquis Counties). The group determined that communities across the mountain region shared similar resources, challenges, and opportunities, and members resolved to work together across local boundaries toward a sustainable economic future for the region as a whole.

In 2004, the group, now calling itself the Maine Mountain Heritage Network and including over 200 businesses, non-profits, and government agencies, created a regional development plan (Attachment 3). The plan included provision for strengthening the region's information management and communications capacity ("Knowledge Power") as a primary component.

Within the Knowledge Power program (Attachment 4), the plan envisions better coordination of and support for information gathering (research), creation of an integrated system of information centers to manage and disseminate information, and development of publications and web sites for better communication of regional information to a number of internal and external audiences.

Integrated System of Information Centers

Early in the Network's planning process, a number of participating communities expressed interest in establishing information centers. These centers, as proposed, had different functions and forms. Some were more oriented toward visitors, others more toward local residents. Many proposed centers included an "interpretive" component, seeking to provide various audiences with information about the history and natural history of their respective surrounding areas. All intended to convey information about activities and experiences (for example, special events or visitor itineraries) through which visitors and residents could actively engage with local and regional heritage.

After preliminary consultation, local project representatives decided to collaborate on creating an integrated system of information centers. This "system" approach would be intended to provide for coherent messaging and consistent audience experience across the mountain region, contributing to a sense of regional identity (one of the Network's primary objectives). To this end, participating information center projects would adopt regional guidelines for information presentation (Attachment 5) and would share interpretive information across projects (see "pilot project" below).

Members of the MMHN Knowledge Power team believed that this "regional system" approach would yield economies of scale with respect to application of technical assistance resources, creating and sustaining communications infrastructure, and seeking funding support.

Members of the MMHN Knowledge Power team acknowledged that proposed system would be structured BOTH

- To deepen knowledge of place among residents of the region
- AND
- To contribute to a rich and rewarding visitor experience.

In other words, this would be both an education project and an economic development project.

Note: The tourism market that the Network is attempting to appeal to is the “experiential” market identified by Fermata, Inc. in its state-sponsored strategic plan created to support nature tourism in Maine. Among other things, the experiential tourist seeks authentic encounters from which they can “learn” about natural systems and local culture. In this instance, the educational opportunity adds economic value to the tourism product. The Fermata plan specifically recommends creating a “network” of information centers as an important step toward appealing to this new market.

Knowledge Power Team

The Knowledge Power team (Attachment 6) has been made up largely of representatives or organizations that were proposing or were already operating information or interpretive centers. Members have included:

- Bob Haynes, Old Canada Road National Scenic Byway
- Bruce Hazard and Shaunacy Cobb, Maine Mountain Heritage Center, Farmington
- Jeff Hewett, Town of Skowhegan
- Guilds Hollowell, Katahdin Cultural Center, Millinocket
- Paul Johnson, Natural Resource Education Center, Greenville
- Rebecca Kurtz, Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway
- Carolann Ouellette, Jackman Chamber
- Don Palmer, Rangeley Outdoor Sporting Heritage Museum
- Robin Zinchuk, Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce

The group has also benefited from participation of Dina Jackson and Bob Kasputes, Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments; Jonathan Daniels, Chris Shrum, and Ann McAlhany, Eastern Maine Development Corporation; Jessica Leahy and Marilynne Mann, University of Maine Orono; Marc Edwards, Franklin County Cooperative Extension; Fred Michaud, Maine Department of Transportation; Phil Savignano, Maine Office of Tourism; Tim Trafford, representing Congressman Michael Michaud.

Pilot Project

To lay the groundwork for developing an integrated regional information system, the team decided to undertake a “pilot project.” The project involved planning, designing, and deploying a traveling exhibit (Attachment 7). Beginning in 2005, team members created a thematic framework (Attachment 8) much of which was incorporated into the Fermata report; solicited stories and images (Attachment 9) from participating communities; and finally commissioned the design and build of a touch screen kiosk to present the collected stories and images. The project was funded by the Old Canada Road National Scenic Byway group and the Maine Department of Transportation.

The project was completed in January, 2007. During its first year “on the road,” the exhibit traveled to Farmington, Rangeley, Skowhegan, Jackman, Dover Foxcroft, and Millinocket – after making its debut at the Governor’s Tourism Conference at the Samoset Resort in Rockport.

Current Situation Analysis

On a parallel track, during the summer of 2006, Mountain Counties Heritage began work on the public facilities development project funded by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development – the subject of this report.

As a first step toward assessing the needs and opportunities within local areas that were seeking to establish or sustain information centers, and to begin to identify potential approaches to planning, designing, financing, building, owning, and operating information centers that could be effective in these local areas, the Knowledge Power team directed Mountain Counties Heritage to undertake a “current situation analysis.”

Over the course of the summer, an MCH representative met with representatives from each of the participating communities, gathering information about existing facilities and programs, considering proposed new facilities and programs, and talking with potential partners.

Areas/organizations surveyed included the following:

- Bethel Area: Bethel Area Chamber of Commerce (operating visitor center, proposing new visitor information and interpretive center); White Mountain National Forest (operating visitor center); Bethel Historical Society (operating interpretive center); State of Maine (closed visitor center)
- Rangeley Area: Rangeley Lakes Region Chamber of Commerce (operating newly rebuilt visitor center); Rangeley Lakes Regional Historical Society (operating museum); Rangeley Lakes Region Logging Museum (operating museum); Rangeley Lakes State Park (kiosk and naturalist program); Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway (proposing new interpretive center); Rangeley Outdoor Sporting Heritage Museum (proposing new interpretive center).
- Farmington Area: Franklin County Chamber of Commerce (operates visitor center); Mountain Counties Heritage (operates Maine Mountain Heritage Center); Farmington Historical Society (operates house museum and proposing new facility in Old North Church); Wilton Farm and Home Museum (operates museum); Franklin County Agricultural Museum (operates museum open during Farmington Fair).
- Skowhegan Area: Skowhegan Area Chamber of Commerce (operates visitor center); Skowhegan History House (operates house museum); Margaret Chase Smith Library (operates interpretive center); L.C. Bates Museum (natural history museum); Skowhegan Economic Development Corporation (proposing new multi-purpose facility including information kiosk).
- Upper Kennebec Area: Old Canada Road National Scenic Byway (operating visitor center, proposing new interpretive center). Solon Historical Society (operates museum).
- Jackman Area: Jackman Moose River Chamber of Commerce (operates information center, unstaffed); Jackman Historical Society (operates museum, summer hours); Town of Jackman (proposing new interpretive center in Jackman train station).
- Moosehead Area: Moosehead Area Chamber of Commerce (operates visitor center); Moosehead Historical Society (operates museum); Moosehead Marine Museum (operates museum); Natural Resource Education Center (proposing new interpretive facility).
- Katahdin Area: Katahdin Area Chamber of Commerce (operates visitor center); Baxter State Park Authority (park headquarters provides park information); Ambejeus Boom House; Patten Lumberman’s Museum; Millinocket Historical Society; Katahdin Cultural Center (proposing new interpretive facility); Penobscot Nation (proposing new interpretive facility).

At the end of the summer, MCH presented summary findings to the Knowledge Power team.

1. Multi-function, multi-partner approach: Despite local enthusiasm for information center projects, many communities had struggled to gather the resources and the know-how to create them. Because stand-alone information centers had proved difficult to create and/or sustain, several communities were focusing on creating multi-partner, multi-function facilities that can utilize a number of revenue streams to support a central information function on a more sustainable basis.

On the other hand, local organizations, each with their own agenda, funding sources, sense of urgency, sometimes had a difficult time working with others on a collaborative basis, however desirable that might be from a community or regional perspective. Few communities had an existing decision-making structure or process to resolve differences that can arise, supporting a collaborative approach.

2. Regional priorities. The region did not have a process or structure for determining levels of priority from one community to the next. The team thought it might be useful to distinguish between communities/centers with respect to regional function.

For example, since most visitors to our region travel south to north (southern Maine and Massachusetts being our primary market areas), some locations might serve as “gateways” to the region: Norway/South Paris, Farmington, Skowhegan, Dover Foxcroft, and Millinocket. These might be considered to have high regional priority as they help direct visitors to points of interest within, for example, a whole county. Other centers might be located in what we could call “destination areas”: Bethel, Rangeley, Upper Kennebec and Jackman, Greenville. Effective information centers in these locations could add value to the visitor experience in those local areas.

Note: The State of Maine has given highest priority to centers located at the state border along major highways leading into the state (in our region, Fryeburg, Bethel, and Jackman). At present, with the exception of the Fryeburg center which has recently opened, no funding exists for building or operating additional state centers.

3. Financial requirements. Capital needs for implementation of proposed projects was difficult to establish, but estimates were as follows. Timing of projects seemed very dependent on available funds. Some fundraising was well underway; in other cases, it had not begun.

Location/project	Near term project	Longer term project
Bethel – new interpretive center to house multiple partners	unknown	
Rangeley – Outdoor Sport Museum	\$1 million (fundraising underway)	
Rangeley – Scenic Byways interpretive center		\$600,000
Skowhegan/Sterns building	\$600,000 (\$400,000 of this already secured)	
Upper Kennebec/OCR Interpretive center		\$2 million
Jackman/Train Station	unknown	
Greenville/NREC	\$1.5 million	
Millinocket/Katahdin Cultural Center	\$750,000	

Some projects were planning to raise all building capital needed through grants and contributions before beginning project. Some were contemplating mortgages enabling extension of period available to raise funds. The Katahdin Cultural Center was working with an idea to create an LLC supported by New Markets tax credits and guaranteed loans to be paid off by a capital campaign.

Projected operating budgets for new centers ranged from \$100,000 to \$200,000 annually. Some organizations proposing new or upgraded centers were already operating centers and had demonstrated ability to raise necessary operating funds. Others had no operating or fund raising experience. At least one project was proposing establishing an endowment to cover some portion of operating expenses.

Proposals for operating revenue sources included space rental (to partner organizations), fund raising events, workshop and performance fees, limited retail, municipal donations, membership dues, reservation commissions, and grants. Although the State of Maine had no current plans for expanding its state visitor information center program, the team noted that both Bethel and Jackman would benefit from state participation in (financial support for) locally operated centers in these key entry locations.

4. Organizational capacity. In some instances, new projects were being proposed by existing organizations currently operating facilities. This provided a sound basis for making financial and program projections based on experience. In other cases, organizations were sponsoring programs but had little facility development or operating experience. The team acknowledged that even the most mature organizations could have a difficult time organizing and managing a multi-partner approach.

Work on a Knowledge Power pilot project (traveling exhibit) had revealed some lack of communication and working relationship between information holders (scholars, historical societies, etc.) and information providers (chamber of commerce for example), even at the local level. This gap suggested a need/opportunity for developing Knowledge Power “networks” at the local level to support, not only the development of information centers, but all aspects of information gathering, management, dissemination as it relates to heritage resources and heritage-based development.

5. Conclusions from Situation Analysis (Fall, 2006)

- The “gold standard” of locally operated, highly evolved information/interpretive centers linked in a system serving the Maine Mountain region continued to seem feasible as a long term goal.
- To reach this goal, individual centers would need help in creating viable plans and in securing resources required to build new facilities.
- Local areas might be well served in the near term by establishing local networks using organizations operating/proposing centers as “hubs” linking a variety of information providers within local areas.

Note: The group had anticipated need for a new regional development corporation to raise and allocate funds (grants and loans) and to provide technical assistance to local projects (real estate and organizational development). Discussions with several existing development agencies suggested that these functions could be undertaken by one or a combination of these existing agencies thereby eliminating need for a new corporation.

Moving Forward: Business Plans, Networks, Kiosk System, Capital Campaign

In response to the current situation analysis, the Knowledge Power team proposed to undertake a development program which would include assistance to local organizations in preparing business plans for local centers, development of more short term activities that could begin to address the immediate need for more effective visitor information providing (networks and kiosks), and planning for longer term fund development to help local organizations get their facilities built.

Business Plans for Local Centers

Responding to the identified need for business planning, during the fall of 2006, a representative of the Network began assisting groups that were proposing development of new centers in creating plans for their respective projects. A template for these plans was designed to include information as follows:

- Introduction: Give a quick overview of the project and where you stand right now.
- Description of your organization: Include mission and goals.
- Management Structure: Who are the players? If there is a Board of Directors involved, include them and provide a brief bio of staff.
- Market Analysis: What market are you trying to attract with your project? Do you have supporting information or studies that show a market need?
- Financial Data: If the project is new make projections of expenses, revenues. For the existing entities, provide current numbers and projections if new programs are implemented.
- Fundraising: If capital is needed, what ideas do you have to secure funding? Include all approaches, from a capital campaign to traditional financing.

Preliminary plans were reviewed by business development specialists from Eastern Maine Development Corporation and the Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments. In a team workshop in November, 2006 (Attachment 6), counselors provided general recommendations for strengthening plans.

The November workshop also included a presentation by Jessica Leahy and Marilynne Mann of the University of Maine at Orono of a survey project they had conducted on the Old Canada Road National Scenic Byway to determine visitor interest in a proposed interpretive center at the Robbins Hill (Solon) site. Results from the survey were instructive and the survey itself provided a model for other centers to use in determining visitor interests in their respective locations. Survey report and results of a second survey undertaken for the Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway are also included. (Attachment 10)

Local plans (in draft form) were shared on a team website (wiki) and adjustments to plans were made throughout the process. These plans are the basis for moving a number of information center projects forward at the local level. (Attachment 11)

Note: Although the focus of the team has been focused on “planning” during this grant period, implementation of local projects is already well underway. The Maine Mountain Heritage Center in Farmington has opened and has established a permanent exhibit. The Skowhegan Economic Development Corporation has begun construction of its new multi-purpose facility in downtown Skowhegan. The Rangeley Outdoor Sporting Museum is raising funds, assembling a collection, and has acquired land. The Natural Resource Education Center in Greenville has continued to

sponsor successful programs for visitors and for local schools. Information about current activities is attached.

“No Wrong Door”

Understanding that some of the proposed new centers will take some number of years to develop, the Knowledge Power team turned consideration to steps that could be taken in the near term to address the need for providing good information to residents and visitors regarding local history and natural history and related events and activities.

Based on the “current situation analysis,” the group determined that networking existing organizations and businesses to allow sharing of information about assets and activities was a potential low cost approach to achieving better information delivery to “customers.” One team member suggested a “no wrong door” model developed in a different field (mental health) which positions providers in a system such that whatever the first point of contact is, that organization would know where to send the “client” for the service required (hence “no wrong door”). A further customer service dimension was added by another participant who described a policy her organization had adopted of never answering a customer inquiry with an “I don’t know” response. Instead, front line information providers are trained to say “let me find out for you” and are given the tools they need to find answers.

This line of thinking resulted in a Knowledge Power team proposal to create “local knowledge networks” established to fulfill the information managing and providing functions envisioned. Those team members representing existing or proposed centers saw their organizations as potential “hubs” for local networks and as such resolved to support local network development in their own service areas as well as to maintain connections with “hub” organizations in other parts of the region to insure continued regional continuity of effort.

In recent months, the local knowledge network concept has been folded in to a broader effort to establish local area “tourism production networks” that would include businesses, non-profits, and government agencies responsible for all components of a successful visitor experience, including providing good information. (Attachment 12)

Network members are currently seeking funding to support development of tourism production networks in three pilot areas. Cost estimate: \$20,000 per local area network (part-time field organizer over two year development period).

Kiosk System

A second near term action recommendation coming out of the Knowledge Power team’s consideration of the “current situation analysis” focused on an opportunity to create a linked system of electronic visitor information kiosks, possibly touch screen kiosks modeled on the group’s traveling exhibit. These kiosks could be deployed quickly using existing visitor information facilities and even private businesses as customer access points.

The Maine Mountain Heritage kiosk system is currently conceived as a web-based “intranet” that allows participating organizations to input data on natural and cultural assets, related events and activities, as well as local accommodations, restaurants, retailers and other visitor services. The system would provide a user interface that supports site specific data searches (“show me all historical museums within 20 miles of this kiosk” or “give me an MP3 that allows me to identify bird songs I might hear in this region”) and potentially allows for on-line restaurant and lodging reservations. MMHN is developing thematic itineraries that could also be promoted on this system. (Attachment 13)

Note: This system would be designed to support experience of visitors who are already in the region but could be linked to an external website for promotion and even sales. (Attachment 14)

Network members are currently seeking funding to support design and deployment of the proposed kiosk system. Cost estimate: \$500,000 (software and hardware, 12 locations).

Capital Campaign

Most community organizations proposing new interpretive or information centers acknowledge that raising funds to build facilities is a major challenge. In group discussions, team members explored the possibility of partnering on fund raising efforts. It was resolved that, while members of the group will continue to seek funding independently for their projects, all would also support a collective fund raising campaign.

The MMHN coordinating committee, in response to this proposal by the Knowledge Power team, has worked for the past year to design a regional capital campaign which would be intended to secure financial support for “projects of regional significance,” to include visitor information centers. Other kinds of projects to be funded through this campaign include:

- Land conservation projects
- Downtown revitalization projects
- Trail development and recreational, science study facilities
- Cultural conservation projects.
- Creative economy projects
- Production cluster facilities (aggregation, packaging, distribution facilities, kitchens)

While half of the funds raised through the campaign would flow through to identified local projects, the campaign would also seek to create a Maine Mountain Heritage Fund to be managed by a member of the Network and to be made available to fund future “regionally significant” projects over the next five years.

The MMHN coordinating team has secured partial funding for a feasibility study for the proposed campaign. (Attachment 15) The feasibility study will include preparation of a preliminary case statement, profiles of sample “regionally significant” projects, and interviews with potential contributors. Analysis of the interview results will determine whether and how to move forward with the campaign itself.

Note: In September, 2007, the MMHN coordinating team decided to invite participation in the campaign by like-minded organizations in Penobscot, Washington, and Aroostook Counties, causing the group to change the name of the campaign to “Campaign for the Maine Woods.”