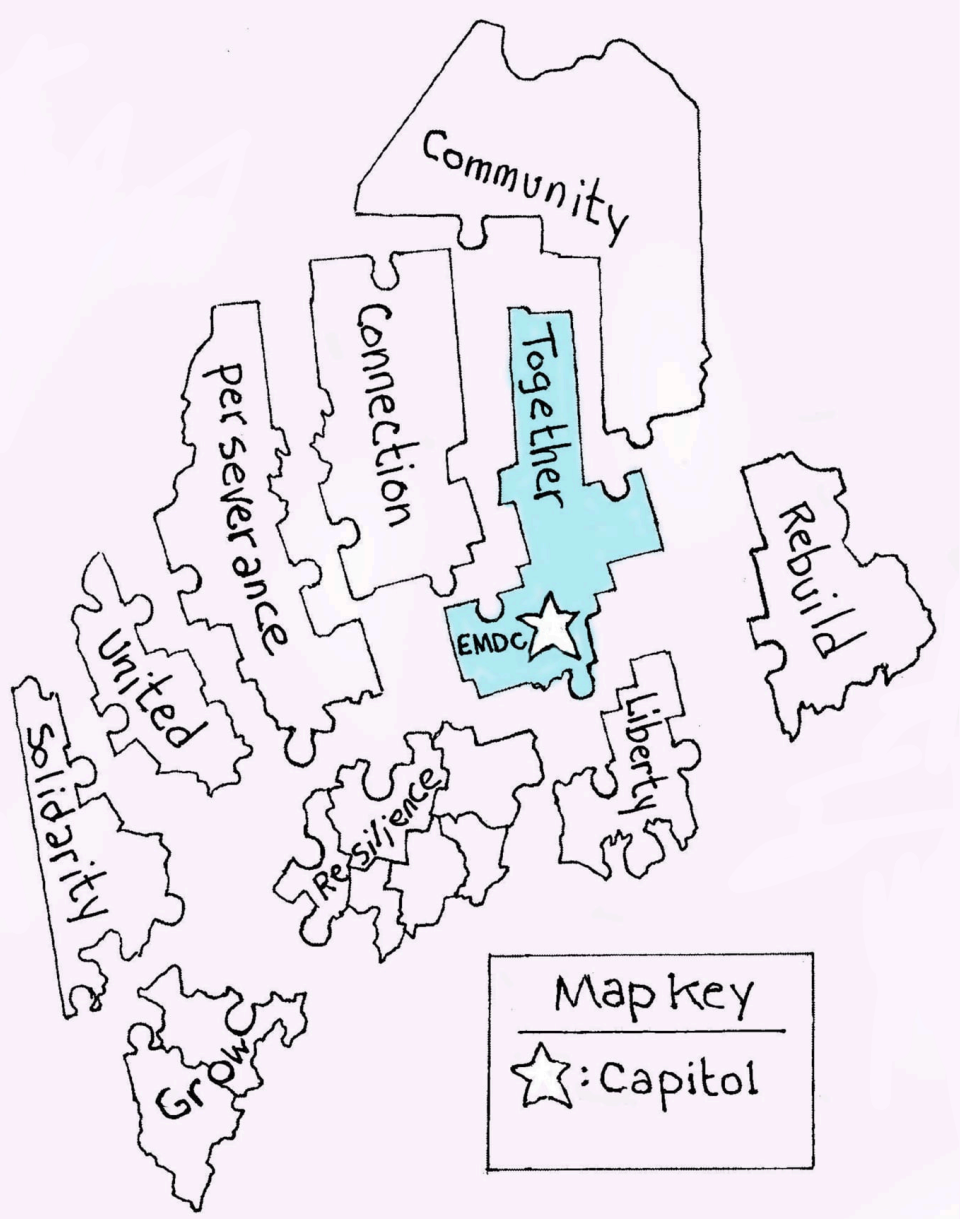
EMDC EASTERN MAINE DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy



Effective April 2026 - March 2031

Connected Path to Success

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Executive Summary

The Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC) Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) provides a five-year roadmap for advancing economic prosperity across Penobscot, Piscataquis, Hancock, and Waldo counties. Developed through collaboration with municipalities, businesses, educational institutions, workforce organizations, tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, state agencies, and other regional stakeholders, the CEDS establishes a shared vision for strengthening the region's economy through coordinated investment, strategic partnerships, and regional collaboration.

Eastern Maine possesses significant competitive advantages, including nationally recognized higher education and research institutions, abundant natural resources, world-renowned tourism destinations, expanding advanced manufacturing capabilities, growing entrepreneurship, and a strong network of public and private partners. At the same time, the region faces persistent challenges that influence long-term economic competitiveness, including workforce shortages, demographic change, housing availability, aging infrastructure, municipal capacity constraints, rising energy costs, and the increasing impacts of severe weather. Addressing these challenges while leveraging the region's strengths will be critical to sustaining economic growth over the next five years.

The regional assessment and stakeholder-driven SWOT analysis identified five strategic priorities that will guide implementation of this CEDS:

- Housing – Expand housing capacity and affordability to support workforce attraction, retention, and long-term community growth.
- Transportation – Modernize transportation infrastructure and strengthen connections that improve the movement of people, goods, and services.
- Economic Resilience – Increase community resilience through infrastructure investment, hazard mitigation, energy innovation, and long-term planning.
- Workforce & Education – Train, retain, and attract talent by strengthening workforce development, education, digital literacy, and employer partnerships.
- Business Development – Support entrepreneurship, business expansion, innovation, access to capital, and regional competitiveness.

These priorities are mutually reinforcing and recognize that economic prosperity depends on coordinated investment across multiple sectors. Expanding housing supports workforce growth; transportation and digital infrastructure strengthen business competitiveness; resilient communities attract investment; workforce development provides employers with skilled talent; and thriving businesses create quality jobs that sustain the regional economy.

Implementation of the CEDS will be coordinated by EMDC in partnership with local governments, tribal governments, educational institutions, workforce organizations, state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, utilities, industry associations, and private-sector employers. The strategy identifies priority regional investment opportunities, implementation partners, performance measures, and potential funding sources to support coordinated action throughout the 2026–2031 planning period. Progress will be evaluated annually using measurable indicators including housing production, labor force participation, workforce outcomes, business growth, infrastructure investment, capital leveraged, and jobs created and retained.

Economic resilience serves as the foundation of this strategy. Beyond preparing for natural disasters or economic disruptions, the CEDS emphasizes building long-term regional capacity through economic diversification, infrastructure modernization, workforce development, business innovation, housing investment, and strengthened regional collaboration. By implementing this strategy, Eastern Maine will be better positioned to respond to future challenges while creating new opportunities for businesses, communities, and residents.

This CEDS represents a shared commitment to building a stronger, more competitive, and more resilient regional economy. Through sustained collaboration, strategic investment, and measurable implementation, Eastern Maine will continue to strengthen its economic foundation, improve quality of life, and create opportunities for current and future generations.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that has provided extensive economic development services to Penobscot, Piscataquis, Waldo, and Hancock counties since its establishment in 1967. From Isle au Haut to Island Falls, EMDC provides workforce development, impact lending, and procurement technical assistance to bring economic vitality to eastern Maine's businesses, communities, and job seekers. As a designated Regional Planning Commission, EMDC assists communities in achieving their comprehensive planning goals and supporting local and regional growth. EMDC's integrated programs and individualized services accelerate regional development through a holistic approach that fosters job creation and retention and provides hands-on support to new and existing businesses.

As one of seven designated Economic Development Districts (EDDs) in Maine, EMDC is responsible for developing, maintaining, and updating Eastern Maine's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). To advance regional economic growth and continue its partnership with the Economic Development Administration (EDA), EMDC updates the CEDS every five years. As a strategy-driven plan for regional economic development, the CEDS guides the establishment of regional goals and strategies that support long-term economic prosperity in Eastern Maine.

The Plan

This Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) serves as Eastern Maine's five-year regional economic development strategy for 2026–2031. Building upon the 2021 CEDS, this update reflects changing economic conditions, emerging industries, evolving workforce needs, and the priorities identified through extensive regional stakeholder engagement. The strategy provides a framework for coordinating public and private investment, strengthening regional competitiveness, and supporting sustainable economic growth throughout Penobscot, Piscataquis, Hancock, and Waldo counties.

How to Use This Report

This report is the result of EMDC's collaboration with place-based organizations, businesses, industry representatives, and economic development professionals to identify strategies that leverage regional assets and opportunities, reduce barriers, and create a vibrant, competitive, diverse, and resilient economic environment. It builds upon recent state publications, including Maine's 10-year Economic Development Strategy, four-year Climate Action Plan, and reports issued by the Governor's Economic Recovery Committee following the pandemic, as well as work led by the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) and the

Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF). This CEDS serves as a strategic planning and implementation guide for municipalities, businesses, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, workforce partners, tribal governments, and public agencies. It aligns regional priorities with state and federal economic development initiatives while helping communities identify opportunities for collaboration, funding, and investment. Because regional economic conditions continually evolve, the CEDS is intended to function as a living document that will be monitored and updated throughout the implementation period.

Public Involvement

Regional stakeholder engagement played an integral role in the CEDS process. Between February and June 2026, EMDC held three public meetings to gather input, conduct a SWOT analysis, discuss regional economic resilience, and develop goals and strategies for the plan. Across the three meetings, 76 individuals participated, representing municipalities, counties, state departments, congressional offices, and federal agencies. Tribal governments and organizations were invited to participate throughout development of the CEDS and will continue to serve as implementation partners for regional economic development initiatives. From the larger stakeholder group, EMDC formed a CEDS Steering Committee to refine the plan's vision and strategies and identify potential partners to help accomplish regional goals.

Stakeholder input directly informed the regional SWOT analysis, vision statement, strategic priorities, and implementation framework. Throughout the planning process, participants identified workforce availability, housing, infrastructure, municipal capacity, transportation, and business growth as the region's highest economic development priorities. These themes consistently emerged across meetings and now serve as the foundation for this CEDS.

Figure 1. Weighted responses to regional Strengths conducted at CEDS Committee meeting.

In preparation for the CEDS process, EMDC eng[illegible] Smith Policy Center to conduct a transportation assessment of Penobscot and Piscataquis counties. The assessment's findings helped shape the CEDS transportation goals and strategies for the broader Economic Development District, using the two counties as a model for understanding and addressing transportation needs across the region.

Regional Assessment

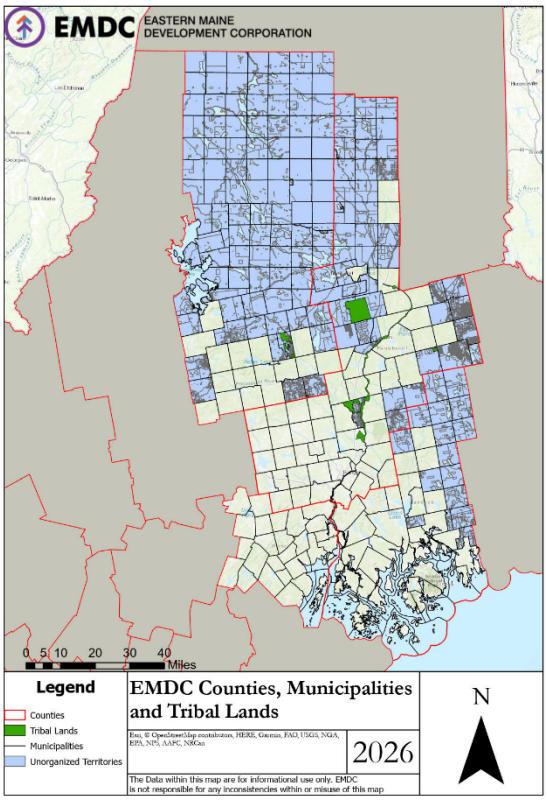
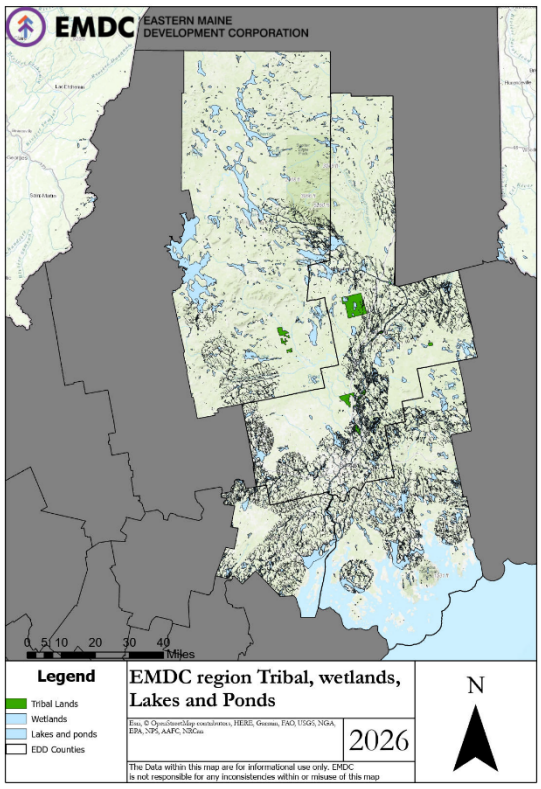
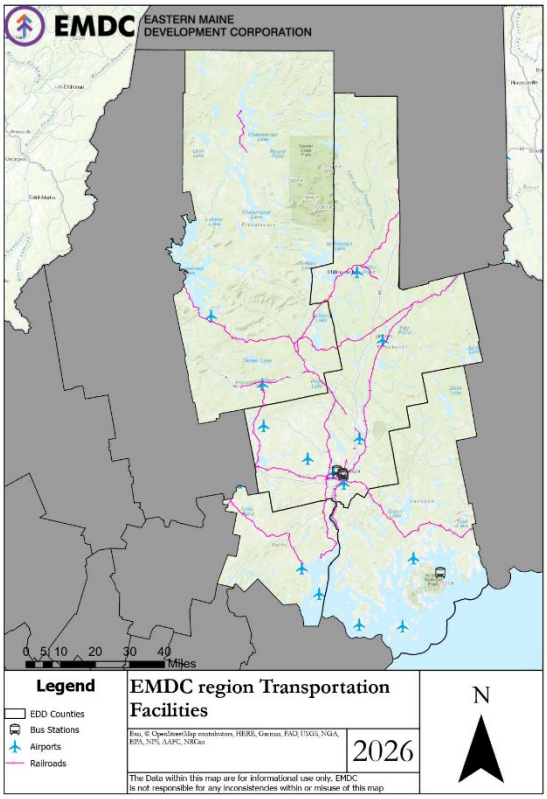


Figure 2-4. Eastern Maine Economic Development District service area, municipal and unorganized-territory boundaries, Tribal lands, wetlands, lakes and ponds, transportation facilities.

The region's geography creates both economic advantages and service-delivery challenges. Deepwater access at Searsport, Bangor International Airport, Hancock County–Bar Harbor Airport, I-95, major state and U.S. highway corridors, and active rail lines connect businesses to domestic and international markets. At the same time, long travel distances, extensive unorganized territory, severe winter conditions, coastal exposure, and limited transportation alternatives increase infrastructure and operating costs. Recent population growth has been concentrated primarily in and around larger service centers and portions of the coastal counties, while many smaller rural and northern communities

Service Area and Regional Geography
The Eastern Maine Economic Development District encompasses Penobscot, Piscataquis, Hancock, and Waldo counties and includes cities, towns, plantations, unorganized territories, and Penobscot Nation lands. The region extends from the working waterfronts, islands, and tourism centers of Penobscot Bay and Mount Desert Island to the forested interior, lake districts, and remote communities surrounding Moosehead Lake and the Katahdin region. Bangor–Brewer functions as the region's largest population, employment, healthcare, education, and service center, while Ellsworth, Belfast, Old Town, Millinocket, Dover-Foxcroft, Greenville, and other communities serve important subregional roles.





continue to experience slow growth, population decline, and accelerated aging. These differences reinforce the need for place-based investment that connects rural communities with regional employment and service hubs.

Economic and Demographic Conditions

The Eastern Maine Development Corporation Economic Development District (EDD) encompasses Penobscot, Piscataquis, Hancock, and Waldo counties. With approximately 271,106 residents, the region accounts for 19.4% of Maine's population. Penobscot County contains the largest share of the region's residents, followed by Hancock, Waldo, and Piscataquis counties. Figures 2–8 provide the population, labor force, age, educational attainment, and industry data that support the economic conditions discussed in this assessment.

Since 2021, unemployment has continuously decreased, a trend similarly experienced by the state, national and global economies. Between March 2023 and March 2024, the region's unemployment rate decreased by 0.3%, from 4.1% to 3.8%, matching the state's unemployment rate of 3.8% and falling below the national average by 1.3%.

Historically, the regional economy depended heavily on forest products, paper manufacturing, agriculture, and other resource-based industries. While these industries remain important contributors to the regional economy, employment has diversified considerably over the past two decades. Healthcare, education, professional services, advanced manufacturing, tourism, and construction now account for a growing share of regional employment, reflecting broader shifts occurring throughout Maine and the Northeast.

Of the region's population, 59% (134,845 people) participate in the labor force, a rate that has decreased slightly since 2015 and sits just below Maine's labor force participation rate of 61.7%. Similarly, 81.5% of regional residents ages 25–54 participate in the labor force, slightly below the state average of 83.8%.

While portions of Eastern Maine continue to experience economic growth, significant areas of the region face persistent economic distress characterized by below-average labor force participation, declining and aging populations, lower household incomes, workforce shortages, infrastructure needs, limited housing availability, and reduced municipal capacity. Rural communities remain particularly vulnerable to economic disruptions associated with demographic change, major employer transitions, natural hazards, and fluctuations in resource-based industries.

As economic trends and conditions change over time, industry and workforce demands shift in response. In 2025, the region's five largest industries were Health Care and Social Assistance, Retail Trade, Educational Services, Accommodation and Food Services, and Construction. Continued growth within healthcare presents both opportunities and challenges. While the sector represents one of the region's strongest employment engines, workforce shortages across healthcare occupations remain one of the largest constraints on regional economic growth.

According to Maine's 2024–2027 Unified State Plan, developed by the State Workforce Board, Maine is projected to experience continued growth in healthcare-related sectors, with occupations such as statisticians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners expected to grow the fastest. Over the next five years, Health Care and Social Assistance is projected to be the most in-demand sector, adding more than 11,400 jobs, followed by Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Services, Educational Services, and Construction. Together, these sectors are projected to add more than 42,200 jobs.

Although traditional paper manufacturing has declined, manufacturing continues to evolve into a more diversified sector that includes precision manufacturing, forest bioproducts, defense supply chains, transportation equipment, marine technologies, and emerging clean energy industries. Continued investment in automation, advanced manufacturing technologies, workforce development, and innovation presents significant opportunities for long-term regional competitiveness.

Although demand remains strong for occupations in construction, manufacturing, food preparation and serving, and transportation and material moving, many high-demand occupations in healthcare, education, management, and office and administrative support require more technical and specialized skills.

The region's concentration of colleges, universities, career and technical education centers, adult education providers, and workforce development organizations represents one of Eastern Maine's greatest competitive advantages. These institutions provide opportunities to expand workforce participation, support lifelong learning, develop industry-recognized credentials, and respond more effectively to changing employer skill demands. Of the total population, the majority of the region either holds some form of postsecondary degree (43.9%) or has earned their high school diploma (30.9%). The strong presence of colleges and universities coupled with the popularity of micro-credential and badging programs presents valuable opportunities for the region's population to gain the in-demand skills they need to actively participate in the workforce.

Over the next five years, regional employment and labor force participation are forecast to decline, trends accelerated by the region's aging population. The region's median age is 45.2, exceeding Maine's median age of 44.8 and the national median of 38.9. In addition, the out-migration of young people underscores the need to increase labor force participation among existing residents and attract talent from outside the state. However, below-average wages and limited access to reliable transportation, affordable housing, broadband, and quality childcare present barriers to attracting and retaining a viable workforce. Of the region's households, 78% have a broadband subscription, compared with 82% statewide. Across Maine, one in six families lacks broadband access (Collins, 2021). From the coastal economies of Hancock and Waldo counties to the rural economies of Penobscot and Piscataquis counties, the EMDC region offers abundant educational services, outdoor recreation opportunities, and a high quality of life.

The region's long-term competitiveness will depend upon its ability to expand affordable housing, strengthen workforce participation, modernize infrastructure, diversify industry sectors, improve municipal capacity, and leverage its educational institutions, natural resources, and entrepreneurial ecosystem. The strategies presented throughout this CEDS are designed to build upon these regional strengths while addressing the barriers that currently limit sustainable economic growth.

The Regional Assessment demonstrates that Eastern Maine possesses significant competitive advantages while facing structural challenges that influence long-term economic prosperity. Stakeholder engagement confirmed that no single issue exists in isolation. Housing affects workforce availability, workforce influences business growth, infrastructure supports economic competitiveness, and resilient communities attract both investment and talent.

The SWOT analysis builds upon this assessment by identifying the region's principal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Together, these findings establish the strategic foundation for the goals, implementation priorities, and performance measures contained in this Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

Target Industry Clusters

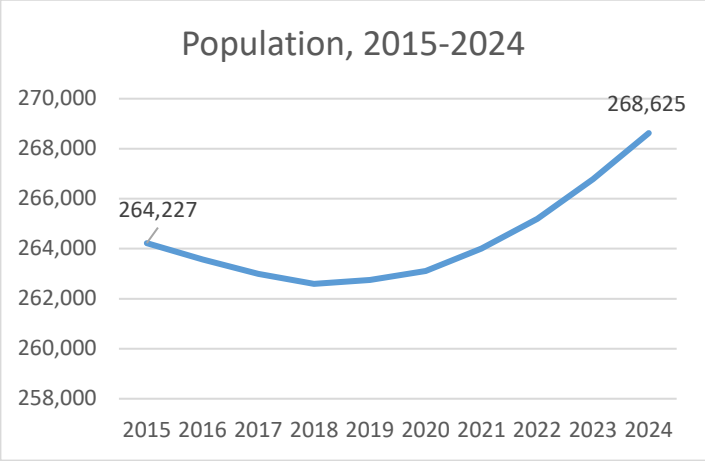
Eastern Maine's economy is supported by a mix of established and emerging industries that provide employment, attract investment, and strengthen regional competitiveness. Based on stakeholder input, labor market trends, and regional assets, this CEDS identifies the following priority industry clusters for continued investment and collaboration:

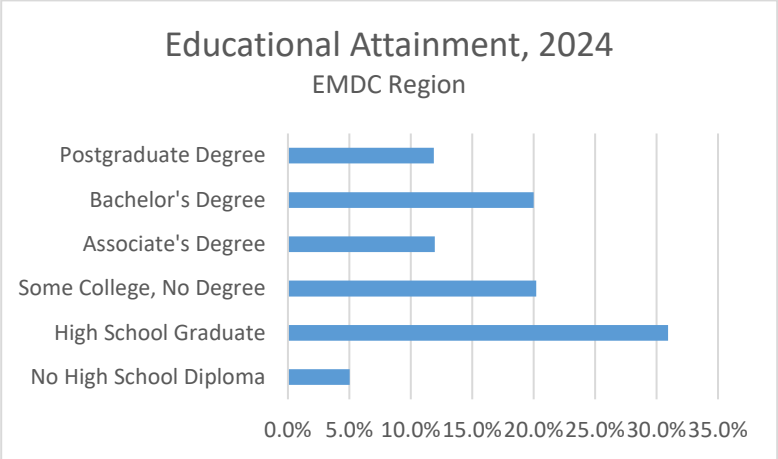
- Healthcare and Life Sciences
- Advanced Manufacturing
- Forest Products and Bioproducts
- Agriculture and Food Systems
- Blue Economy and Marine Industries
- Tourism and Outdoor Recreation
- Professional and Technical Services
- Transportation, Logistics, and Distribution
- Defense and Aerospace Supply Chains
- Construction and Skilled Trades

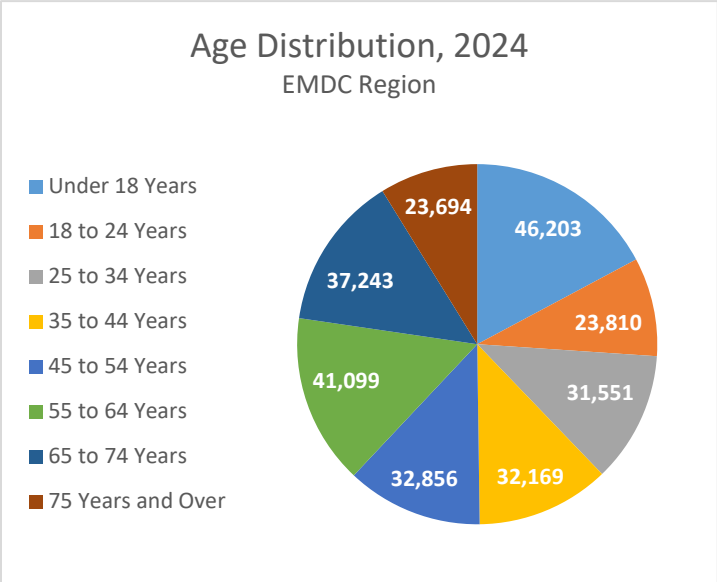
These industries leverage the region's natural resources, educational institutions, transportation assets, research capacity, entrepreneurial ecosystem, and skilled workforce. Collectively, they represent the greatest opportunities for business growth, innovation, workforce development, and long-term economic resilience. Public and private investment in these sectors will strengthen regional competitiveness while supporting high-quality employment opportunities throughout Eastern Maine.

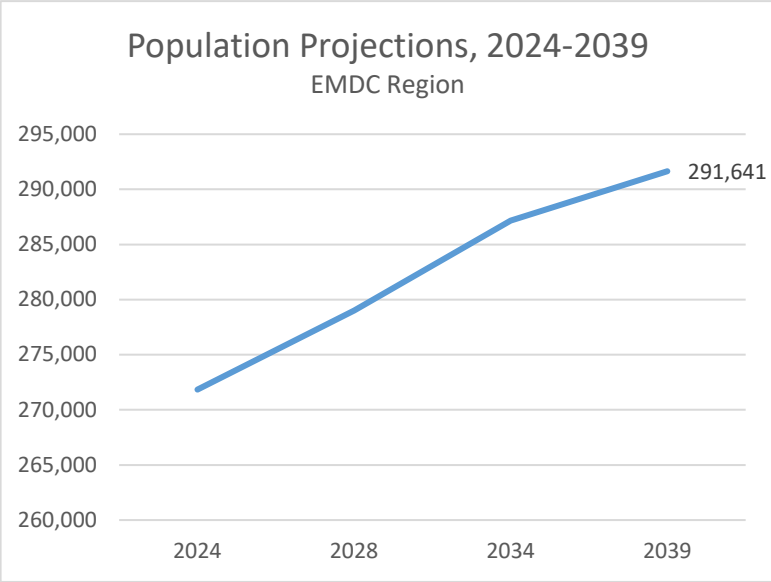
The data below illustrate the demographic and workforce conditions shaping the regional strategy. Figures 5-8 show modest overall population growth alongside an aging population and projected changes that vary across the four counties. Figures 9-11 show that labor force participation remains constrained, particularly among older residents, even as healthcare, education, construction, manufacturing, tourism, and other major industries continue to need workers. Together, these trends support the CEDS priorities for housing, workforce participation, transportation access, business growth, and long-term resilience.

Figures 5-8. Educational attainment, age distribution, population projections, and population trends for the EMDC region.

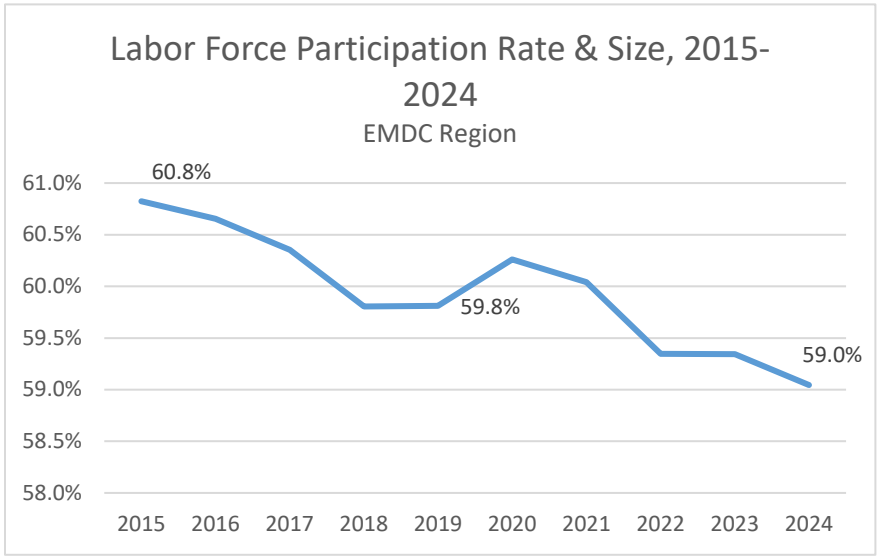


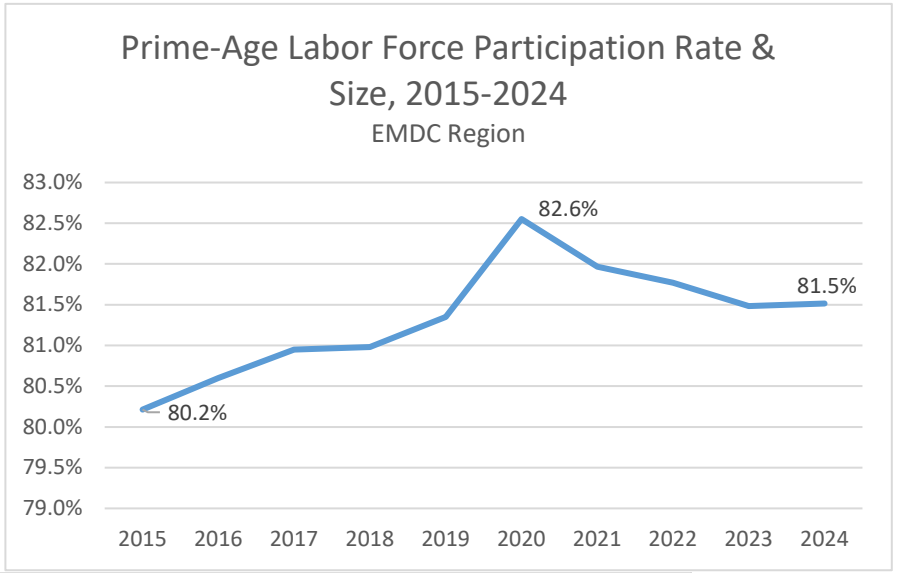


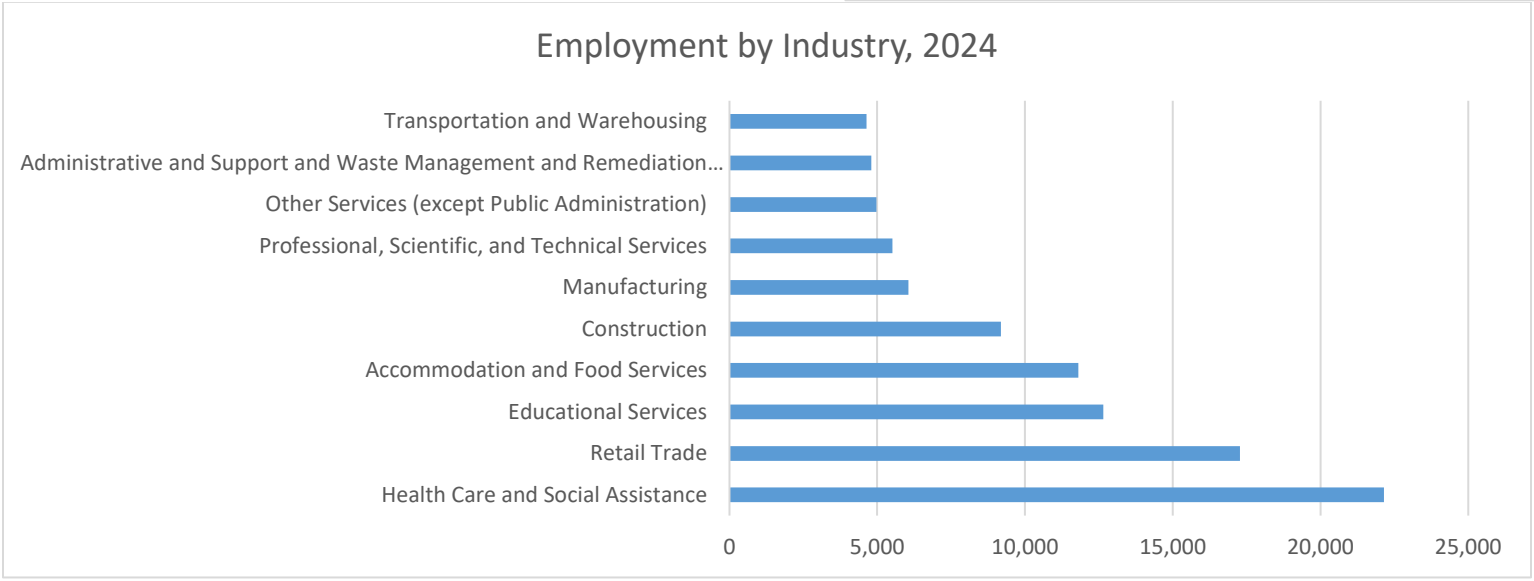




Figures 9-11. Employment by industry and labor force participation trends for the EMDC region.







Sources: JobsEQ, ACS, 5-year estimates, 2020-2024, StatsAmerica

SWOT

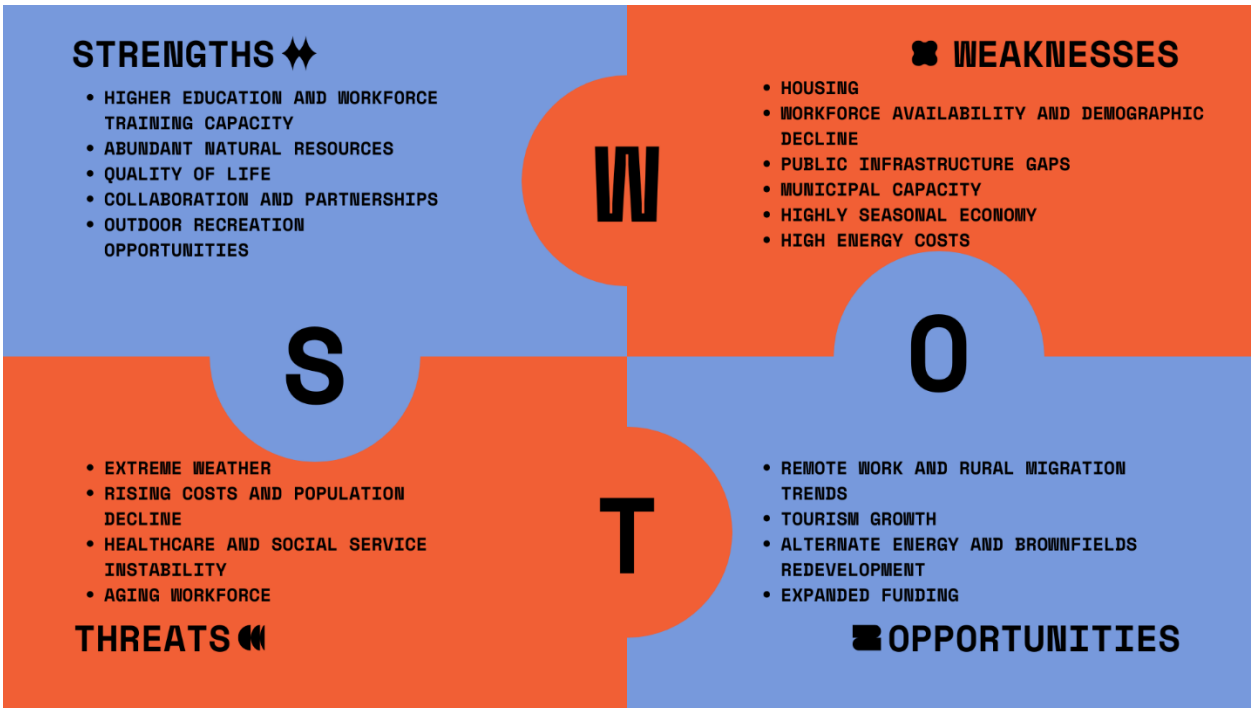


Figure 12. Results of a SWOT analysis conducted at the March 4, 2026, CEDS Committee meeting.

At a CEDS planning committee meeting in March 2026, 70 stakeholders of various backgrounds engaged in a SWOT analysis exercise to brainstorm the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that exist in the region. During the exercise, participants worked in small groups to discuss significant regional assets, as well as areas for improvement, opportunities for growth, and barriers to growth. The SWOT analysis exercise was instrumental in shaping the plan's vision statement, goals and strategies.

Leveraging our regional strengths and opportunities to diminish weaknesses and threats will be key for a resilient and vibrant economy.

Strengths

Higher Education and Workforce Training Capacity

Our region has a range of education opportunities from local adult education programs to higher education institutions. This includes Husson University, EMCC, the flagship campus of UMaine, and other well-respected educational institutions. These are centers of employment, learning, and training, providing important resources for upskilling workers and ensuring the next generation of Mainers have the skills they need to succeed through shifts in the structure of the economy. The ready supply of educated professionals is an important draw for new businesses, and a source of opportunity for further collaboration in the region.

At EMDC, the Workforce Services team provides a variety of programs, workshops, and educational and training resources for both new and long-term regional residents. Utilizing existing and added resources to welcome and support workers of all backgrounds will be critical to strengthen the region's workforce efforts. Continued collaboration between education and

industry strengthens the region's ability to attract employers, retain talent, and improve long-term economic competitiveness. For workers, EMDC is the bridge between education and training and jobs at businesses.

Abundant Natural Resources

Maine's natural resources act as a significant draw for both visitors and businesses. 89% of Maine's land area is forested, containing nearly 28 billion cubic feet of trees (USDA Forest Service, 2022). Tens of millions of pounds of lobster, fish, and other harvested marine resources come in through the ports of Hancock County. Our beaches, lakes, and parks (discussed more elsewhere) draw tourists and sustain a recreation-based economy. Our region has hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland, producing crops and raising livestock of all kinds, 90% of which are family-owned (Census of Agriculture, n.d.). These resources are the bedrock of Maine's economy and continue to be a strength for recreation and employment.

Quality of Life

From the coastal communities of Hancock and Waldo counties to the rural communities of Penobscot and Piscataquis counties, the region offers scenic landscapes and countless opportunities to connect with nature. Quality of life is important not only to residents and communities but also to businesses. During the site-selection process, proximity to forests, lakes, and the ocean can significantly influence where a business chooses to locate and enhance appreciation for Eastern Maine's quality of life (Akard, 2020).

Collaboration and Partnerships

Between public and private sectors, EMDC is the hub for strong collaboration and partnerships. From technical assistance to consulting and more, there is a multitude of regional entities and organizations doing impactful work across all sectors including technology, education, and transportation. At the local level, communities are partnering with regional businesses and organizations to reach solutions to ongoing challenges. At the regional level, projects like the Moosehead Lake Ski Resort would not be possible without collaborative support from EMDC, Moosehead Lake Region Economic Development Corporation, and Piscataquis County Commissioners. At EMDC, partnerships with the U.S. Small Business Administration, U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, and local financial institutions enhance the local impact lending program that supports the development of regional businesses. At the state level, through the administration of the Maine APEX program, EMDC provides businesses with the tools they need to sell their goods and services to local, state and federal governments.

Through collective action, shared goals related to regional challenges are accomplished. To address the challenges that hospitals located in rural areas face in attracting a qualified workforce, EMDC's Workforce Services team partners with EMCC's Katahdin Higher Education Center to provide support for a nursing program. To improve the availability and affordability of broadband, EMDC has partnered with Mission Broadband, an organization that is committed to expanding digital infrastructure in rural areas. In a region that is confronted with aging roads and bridges and a lack of public transportation networks, a number of regional organizations including Penquis and Bangor Area Comprehensive Transportation System

(BACTS) provide opportunities for collaboration. Leveraging regional partnerships will be key in implementing strategies for long-term economic prosperity.

Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

The EMDC region is home to a multitude of outdoor recreation opportunities and is a significant four-season destination for tourists. Along the coast in Bar Harbor is the "Crown Jewel of the North Atlantic Coast", Acadia National Park, one of the top 10 most-visited national parks in the United States that draws 3.5 million visits annually (National Park Service, n.d.). A 2.5 hour drive west of Acadia National Park is the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, designated by the National Park Service in 2016. At the state level, Baxter State Park located in northern Piscataquis County is the home of Mount Katahdin, the tallest mountain in Maine and the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, which attracts 60,000 visitors per year. The region's parks, lakes, and mountains provide numerous opportunities for four-season recreational activities including hiking, biking, fishing, boating, skiing, snowmobiling, and more.

The region's thriving tourism plays a vital role in the creation and retention of jobs. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce's Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account (ORSA), in 2019, the outdoor recreation industry contributed $2.9 billion to Maine's GDP, representing a 4.2% share of the total GDP. In the same time period, outdoor recreation accounted for over 40,000 jobs and brought in a total compensation of $1.4 billion, 3.4% of the state total. Among other states, Maine ranks 4th in GDP growth, 3rd in compensation growth, and 18th in employment growth related to the outdoor recreation industry. Given the EMDC region's notable tourist destinations and the number of visitors they attract on an annual basis, the area plays a significant role in the state's tourism and hospitality economy.

Weaknesses

Housing

As discussed elsewhere in this report, housing affordability and availability remain significant challenges for the region. Housing costs have risen sharply across Maine in recent years, while wage growth has not kept pace with escalating prices. Although homelessness has declined from its 2022 peak, it remains above pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, a limited housing supply constrains workforce recruitment, business expansion, population growth, and community development, ultimately weakening the region's ability to attract and retain workers.

Workforce Availability and Demographic Trends

Maine is rapidly aging. According to the Census, Maine's population has the oldest median age in the Union (at 44.8 years) and is only getting older. In our region, only Penobscot is below Maine's median age (at 42.6 years old) while most of our region is above it (with the most notable being Piscataquis county, with a median age of 51.0 years old). Combined with continued outmigration of younger residents, these demographic trends limit business growth and increase competition for skilled workers.

Aging Infrastructure

The region's aging digital, transportation, and building infrastructure inhibits economic growth and the movement of people and information. To attract and retain remote workers, the region

must invest in broadband infrastructure by upgrading and expanding existing networks. Aging roads, bridges, and sidewalks increase vehicle repair costs and weaken connections between small municipalities and regional service centers such as Bangor—connections that are crucial for accessing jobs, healthcare, and education. Aging buildings also contribute to high energy costs and inefficient energy use. Maine's harsh winters accelerate the deterioration of transportation infrastructure and increase maintenance costs. Older buildings, roads, and bridges also face growing stress from warming temperatures, sea-level rise, flooding, and increasingly frequent severe storms. The region must maintain existing assets and invest in new infrastructure to improve efficiency, adaptability, and resilience.

Municipal Capacity

Budget constraints, retirements, and declining populations have decreased the administrative capacity of the municipalities in our region. This makes it difficult to respond to the needs of residents and adapt to any changes in the community. It also makes it less likely that municipalities will be able to apply for grants and state programs that would otherwise put more resources in their area. Expanding local capacity remains essential to advancing regional priorities.

Highly Seasonal Economy

Tourism and recreational activities compose a significant portion of the region's economic activity. This brings many benefits, but also many unique challenges. There are significant inflows of people during the summer who require additional infrastructure to service. These seasonal residents leave during the fall and winter, slowing down the pace of the economy while they are gone. There are unique difficulties in maintaining a business that gets most of its sales during one season, and many close during the off season. It is difficult for employers to find seasonal workforce to fill these jobs, and it is difficult for potential workers to find affordable housing near these jobs. Overreliance on tourism can also lead to dire consequences if the industry were to decline in the area.

High Energy Costs

The affordability and reliability of power is essential to the functioning and productivity of the economy. Rising energy costs present a barrier to regional economic growth, particularly related to the establishment and maintenance of small businesses. In addition to Business Survey respondents citing "high energy costs" as a leading factor that makes the region a disadvantageous place for doing business, respondents specified "lower energy costs" as a characteristic they would change about doing business in Maine if they could. At the state level, Maine is challenged by extensive power outages. In 2019, utility customers in Maine experienced the longest duration of power interruptions compared to other states (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2020). A high frequency of power outages coupled with rising energy costs puts both regional businesses and communities at a disadvantage for growth and dependable access to remote work, education, and healthcare. Reduced energy costs and improved energy infrastructure are essential for the immediate and long-term growth of communities and businesses.

Opportunities

Emerging Industry Growth

Eastern Maine is well positioned to expand advanced manufacturing, defense and aerospace supply chains, the Blue Economy, forest bioproducts, renewable energy, value-added agriculture, healthcare innovation, and technology-driven industries. Building upon existing assets while encouraging innovation will strengthen economic diversification and create higher-quality employment opportunities.

Maine Forest Bioproducts Advanced Manufacturing Tech Hub

Maine's designation as a federal Forest Bioproducts Advanced Manufacturing Tech Hub represents a major opportunity for Eastern Maine. Designated by EDA in 2023 and led by the University of Maine with public, private, research, industry, and workforce partners, the Tech Hub is focused on converting forest-based biological materials into advanced construction systems, packaging materials, fuels, and other high-value products. In July 2026, EDA announced a $20 million investment to accelerate commercialization, expand advanced manufacturing capacity, strengthen domestic supply chains, and develop the workforce needed by the sector.

Eastern Maine is central to this opportunity because it contains the University of Maine's research and pilot-scale assets, a skilled forest-products workforce, extensive working forests, rail and industrial infrastructure, and former mill sites suited for redevelopment. Coordinated investment in commercialization, entrepreneurship, workforce training, supply-chain development, and site readiness can help the region capture more value from its natural resources while creating quality jobs and diversifying rural economies. Looking ahead, EMDC has begun developing partnerships in the blue economy, including with Blue Innovation Labs, to position Eastern Maine for emerging opportunities in marine innovation and related industries.

Remote Work and Rural Migration Trends

Maine has become a top destination for people moving from within the US. Maine had the 7th highest rate of net migration of any state in 2025. Many come to enjoy the quality of life of our woods and coast, and to enjoy the opportunities for recreation. Roughly two-thirds of this population are employed, and the vast majority of the remainder are retired. Of those employed, many work remotely elsewhere; 41% of workers who recently moved to Maine say they work remotely "Always" or "Most of the time", with another 22% saying they work remotely "on occasion". The recent expansion of remote work and Maine digital infrastructure, alongside Maine's reputation for a sterling quality of life, continue to provide the ability to attract long-term residents and economic opportunity. Continued investment in housing, childcare, broadband, transportation, and community amenities will improve the region's ability to compete for talent.

Tourism Growth

Tourism remains an important contributor to the region's economy. Maine's reputation as "Vacationland" attracts millions of domestic and international visitors each year to Eastern Maine's beaches, parks, and communities. In 2025, tourists spent more than $16.5 billion in Maine, supporting businesses across the state. Continued tourism growth presents a significant

economic opportunity for the region. By investing in working waterfronts and the recreation economy, Eastern Maine can remain a premier destination for millions of visitors.

Alternate Energy and Brownfields Redevelopment

Maine continues to invest in and develop the alternative energy industry, aiming to create jobs, strengthen the economy, and reduce energy costs. Maine's alternative energy industry has been growing in recent years, receiving boosts from policy initiatives such as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, and the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan. According to the Maine Department of Energy Resources, this industry employed nearly 3% of the state's workforce in 2024, created 614 jobs between 2023-2024, established more than 100 new businesses in the same timeframe.

Maine also continues to pursue initiatives and programs to redevelop brownfields—properties that are impacted by various possible contaminates which impedes re-use—breathing new life into abandoned industrial or commercial properties and rendering them safe and sustainable for new businesses and services. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection views redevelopment of brownfields as a way to protect public health, slows urban sprawl, increases tax revenue, create new jobs, and revitalizes the town supporting the brownfield.

Expanded Funding

To aid municipalities, townships, businesses, and residents, the State has been expanding funding opportunities across the board for a variety of situations; the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, & Forestry is providing millions in funding to repair and expand Maine's trail network for transportation and outdoor recreation through the Maine Trail Program; the Community Action Grant (CAG) is available annually as a no-match grant for municipalities enrolled in the Community Resilience Program; the Maine Infrastructure Adaptation Fund which becomes available every few year; and several coastal grants, such as the reoccurring Shore and Harbor Planning Grants and Coastal Community Planning Grants, among many other opportunities. That's not even to mention other reoccurring funding opportunities such as Congressional Direct Spending or grants from non-governmental organizations like Maine Community Foundation.

Threats

Extreme Weather

Extreme Weather has been impacting Maine with greater frequency and intensity. The state is facing warmer, shorter winters, more intense and unpredictable rainstorms, increased flooding, extreme heat, and more dangerous storms. Flooding, severe storms, coastal erosion, and changing weather patterns increasingly threaten public infrastructure, businesses, natural resources, and local economies.

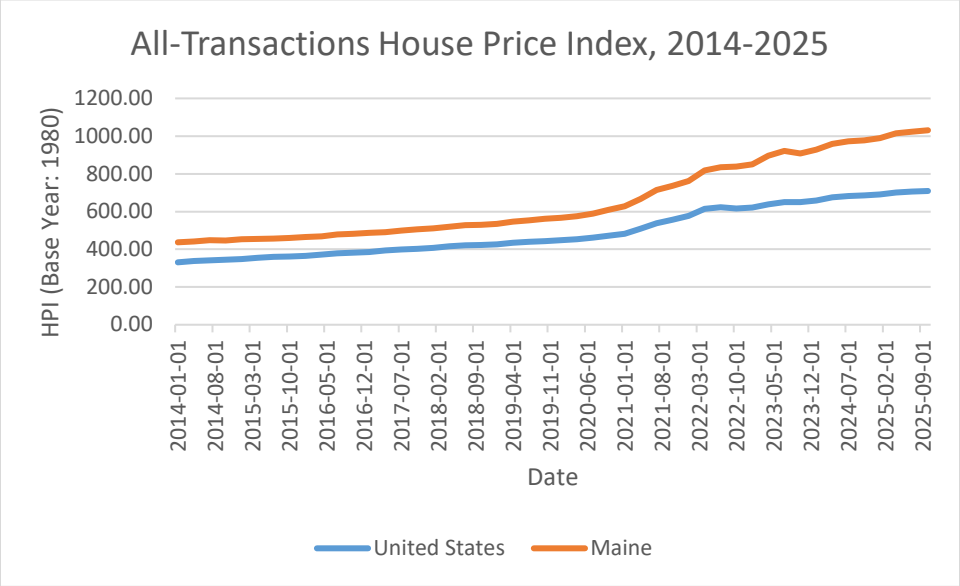
Rising Costs and Population Decline

Costs in Maine have been rising, and rising faster than elsewhere in the country. Between 2014 and 2024, Maine's energy costs rose by the third-highest percentage in the country. Not only are housing costs greater than in the nation as a whole, but they are rising at an even faster rate than average. Wages have also remained below the national average ($1,110/week as opposed to the

national average of $1,270/week as of December 2025). This problem is especially acute in our rural region, where the ratio of average pay to costs is lower than elsewhere in the state. This has driven outmigration from the region, especially for the young people and families which are key for addressing the region's aging workforce. To combat rural out-migration and the subsequent labor force shortage, investments must be made in infrastructure that benefits every individual that participates in the economy, from young people to families and the aging workforce population.

Figure 13 demonstrates the sustained rise in Maine housing prices since 2014, with the sharpest increase occurring after 2020. Because regional wages remain below the national average, this widening gap between earnings and housing costs directly affects workforce recruitment and retention. The trend reinforces the need to expand housing supply, rehabilitate existing units, and invest in infrastructure that enables new residential development.

Figure 13. All-Transactions House Price Index for Maine, 2014–2025.



Source: U.S. Federal Housing Finance Agency, All-Transactions House Price Index for Maine [MESTHPI], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MESTHPI, July 6, 2026.

Healthcare and Social Service Instability

Many communities across the region are facing service instability, especially regarding healthcare. Medical facilities are reducing services or consolidating them in population centers, severely reducing access to healthcare in rural Maine. Straining municipal budgets exacerbates the issue by reducing the funding for medical transport and raising the time it takes for people to reach the hospital after medical emergencies even further. An aging population increases the demand for medical services, making this an issue of extreme importance going forward.

Aging Workforce

An aging workforce coupled with trends of outmigration continues to present challenges to the regional economy. As older workers retire and exit the workforce, replacement demand will increase as employers seek new workers to fill those positions. The outmigration of young

people and families as well as the lack of essential resources like broadband and childcare put the region at a disadvantage for filling workforce gaps. Rich in research and innovation, the region is projected to add thousands of jobs in the energy sector. Without qualified job seekers to fill these positions, the area will miss the economic and environmental benefits associated with an influx of jobs related to renewables and bioproducts. To ensure the long-term productivity and prosperity of the regional economy, additional attention must be given to filling in-demand positions by supporting the existing workforce as well as providing the critical resources needed to attract and retain young, qualified workers.

Economic Development Vision Statement

Improve economic opportunity and increase jobs by strengthening the connectivity and collaboration between communities, businesses and individuals while fostering the region's long-term sustainability, resilience, and prosperity.

Regional Implementation Framework

The goals identified in this Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. While all five goal areas are essential to the long-term prosperity of Eastern Maine, implementation efforts will prioritize activities based on regional need, economic impact, project readiness, available funding, and stakeholder capacity.

Priority implementation will focus on projects that:

- Address critical workforce shortages and labor force participation.
- Expand housing capacity to support workforce attraction and business growth.
- Strengthen existing businesses while fostering entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Improve transportation, utility, and digital infrastructure that supports economic competitiveness.
- Increase the resilience of communities, businesses, and critical infrastructure.

Implementation of this CEDS will remain flexible throughout the five-year planning period to respond to changing economic conditions, evolving workforce and industry needs, new funding opportunities, and emerging regional priorities. EMDC will convene regional partners annually to evaluate progress, monitor performance, identify new opportunities, and adjust implementation strategies as necessary to ensure the CEDS remains responsive and relevant.

The SWOT analysis demonstrates that Eastern Maine's strengths, challenges, and opportunities are closely interconnected. Workforce availability is influenced by housing, transportation, and access to education; business competitiveness depends on infrastructure, innovation, and regional collaboration; and resilient communities are better positioned to attract investment and respond to future economic disruptions. Addressing these interconnected issues requires coordinated regional action that builds upon the region's existing assets while strategically investing in areas that support long-term economic competitiveness and prosperity.

Guided by stakeholder input and the findings of the Regional Assessment and SWOT analysis, the CEDS Steering Committee established five strategic goal areas that will direct regional investment and collaboration throughout the implementation period. Together, these priorities provide a comprehensive framework for strengthening Eastern Maine's economy, improving quality of life, and enhancing regional resilience.

Five Goal Areas:

- Housing
- Transportation
- Community Resilience
- Workforce & Education
- Businesses

These five priority goal areas relate to the connectivity of people, goods and services, all of which are essential for a robust regional economy. The following action plan contains goals and measurable strategies to advance these areas of regional significance for long-term economic prosperity in eastern Maine. Collectively, these goals support the continued growth and competitiveness of Eastern Maine's priority industry clusters by strengthening the workforce, expanding housing, improving transportation infrastructure, increasing regional resilience, and supporting business innovation and investment.

Action Plan

Priority Regional Investment Projects

The following regional initiatives represent the highest-priority investment opportunities identified through stakeholder engagement and analysis. While additional projects will emerge throughout the implementation period, these initiatives are expected to generate the greatest regional economic impact.

Priority Project	Lead Partners	Estimated Timeframe	Potential Funding Sources
Regional Workforce Housing Development and Infrastructure	Municipalities, MaineHousing, EMDC, developers	2026-2031	EDA, USDA Rural Development, MaineHousing, NBRC, private investment
Transportation and Freight Infrastructure Improvements	MaineDOT, BACTS, Port Authority, municipalities	2026-2031	FHWA, EDA, INFRA, RAISE, MaineDOT
Broadband and Digital Infrastructure	ConnectMaine, providers, municipalities	2026-2030	NTIA, USDA ReConnect, BEAD, State Broadband Programs
Business Expansion and Entrepreneurship Initiative	EMDC, DECD, SBDC, CEI, SCORE, MTI	Ongoing	EDA, SBA, USDA, private lending
Brownfield Redevelopment and Site Readiness	EMDC, DEP, municipalities	Ongoing	EPA, EDA, private investment

Goal Implementation Framework
Each goal within this CEDS will be implemented through collaborative partnerships among public agencies, educational institutions, private industry, nonprofit organizations, and local governments. EMDC will serve as the regional convener and coordinator, facilitating implementation, identifying funding opportunities, monitoring progress, and reporting outcomes.

Each implementation effort will include:

- Lead organization(s)
- Supporting implementation partners
- Potential funding sources
- Estimated implementation timeframe
- Performance measures
- Annual progress review

Housing

Goal #1: Expand and Increase the Access and Affordability of Housing

An attainable and adequate housing supply is essential to supporting economic growth, workforce retention, and community vitality throughout Eastern Maine. Population shifts, declining household size, an aging housing stock, and years of limited residential construction have created a persistent mismatch between housing supply and current demand across the region. Although recent increases in housing production reflect encouraging progress, sustained investment and coordinated action will be needed to ensure communities can meet the needs of current residents, attract and retain workers, and accommodate future business growth.

EMDC will work with municipalities, developers, state agencies, and regional partners to expand housing production, encourage the rehabilitation of existing housing, modernize local land use and development regulations, and support infrastructure investments that facilitate residential growth. Together, these efforts will strengthen local economies by expanding housing options, supporting employers' workforce needs, enhancing community competitiveness, and increasing the region's long-term capacity for sustainable economic development.

Strategy #1: Strengthen Regional Housing Planning and Collaboration
- Expand implementation of the Regional Housing Roadmap.
- Support regional coordination among municipalities, housing organizations, and developers.
- Identify housing gaps and prioritize regional housing needs.
- Encourage zoning and land use policies that support housing options.

Strategy #2: Increase Housing Production and Affordability
- Support construction of workforce and attainable housing.
- Encourage rehabilitation and redevelopment of existing housing stock.
- Invest in infrastructure that supports residential development.
- Seek funding opportunities to expand housing capacity and improve affordability.

Potential Implementation Partners

- MaineHousing
- Municipalities
- Regional housing authorities
- Penquis
- Northern Forest Center
- Housing developers
- Financial institutions
- Community development organizations
- Regional planning partners
- USDA Rural Development/Housing Programs

Performance Measures

- Number of new housing units constructed.
- Number of existing housing units rehabilitated or improved.
- Number of municipalities completing zoning and land use updates to support housing development.
- Number of infrastructure projects completed that enable or support residential development.
- Amount of public and private funding leveraged for housing initiatives.
- Number of municipalities participating in regional housing initiatives and collaborative efforts.
- Number of housing development projects supported through technical assistance, planning, or capacity-building activities.

Five-Year Targets (by March 31, 2031)

- Advance at least 10 housing development or rehabilitation projects through planning, technical assistance, financing coordination, or infrastructure support.
- Support the creation or preservation of at least 100 housing units across the four-county region.
- Assist at least 10 municipalities with housing planning, zoning, land use, or development-readiness activities.
- Leverage at least $10 million in public and private investment for housing and housing-enabling infrastructure.

Transportation

Goal #2: Improve and Expand Existing Transportation Infrastructure and Support Port, Rail and Airport Development

An efficient, reliable, and resilient transportation network is fundamental to Eastern Maine's long-term economic competitiveness. The movement of people, goods, and services depends on an integrated system of highways, bridges, rail, ports, airports, public transit, and active transportation infrastructure that connects communities to regional, national, and international markets. Continued investment in this multimodal transportation system will support existing industries, attract new business investment, improve workforce mobility, and position the region to capitalize on emerging economic opportunities.

Recent developments in rail infrastructure, including Canadian Pacific Railway's acquisition of the former Central Maine and Quebec Railway and CSX's proposed acquisition of the Pan Am Railways system, demonstrate the potential to strengthen and optimize intermodal freight transportation throughout the region. Upgrading the rail network to a high-speed, Class I system with double-stack-capable corridors would significantly improve efficiency, capacity, and reliability, creating new opportunities for the movement of goods among Eastern Maine's communities, businesses, and industries and to markets beyond the region.

Modernizing and maintaining both rail and port infrastructure will further enhance freight movement, expand domestic and international trade, reduce transportation costs, and strengthen Maine's role in regional and global supply chains. Continued investment of port infrastructure in Searsport offers significant opportunities to increase cargo capacity, improve access to affordable goods and commodities, support business growth, create high-quality jobs, and strengthen the region's ability to attract and retain residents.

Bangor International Airport (BGR) is another critical transportation asset that serves as a regional gateway for passenger travel, air cargo, tourism, military operations, and business development. The airport serves a market that extends well beyond Bangor and Penobscot County, with approximately 40 percent of its passengers traveling from Canada, demonstrating its importance as an international transportation hub for Eastern Maine. Continued expansion of regional air service, including additional year-round and seasonal routes, will improve connectivity for residents, businesses, and visitors while enhancing access to national and international markets. Expanding air cargo capacity will strengthen regional supply chains, support manufacturers and exporters, and create new opportunities for aviation-related businesses and private investment. Increased passenger service also supports tourism by providing more convenient and affordable access to Eastern Maine's communities, outdoor recreation destinations, and business centers, reinforcing the airport's role as a major regional economic driver.

By coordinating transportation planning with housing, workforce development, business growth, and infrastructure investment, Eastern Maine will strengthen its competitive position while improving mobility, safety, economic opportunity, and regional connectivity for residents, businesses, and visitors.

Strategy #1: Improve Regional Mobility and Access

- Support improvements to roads, bridges, and critical transportation infrastructure.
- Expand public transportation options and regional mobility services.
- Improve bicycle, pedestrian, and multimodal transportation connections.
- Coordinate transportation planning among municipalities and regional partners.

Strategy #2: Strengthen Freight and Intermodal Transportation

- Support modernization of rail, port, and airport infrastructure.
- Improve freight mobility and supply chain connectivity.
- Identify transportation gaps affecting business competitiveness.
- Promote strategic investments that improve regional and international market access.

Performance Measures

- Road and bridge projects completed.
- Rail improvement projects supported.
- Port infrastructure investments.
- Airport infrastructure and air service improvements supported.
- Freight mobility improvements.
- Public transit expansion.
- Transportation grants secured.

Five-Year Targets (by March 31, 2031)

- Advance at least 8 road, bridge, rail, port, airport, public transit, or active transportation projects to funding or implementation.
- Complete or update at least 4 regional or subregional transportation, freight, mobility, or infrastructure needs assessments.
- Support transportation planning and project development in at least 10 municipalities.
- Leverage at least $10 million in public and private transportation investment.

Community Resilience

Goal #3: Foster Methods of Adaptation and Mitigation to Strengthen the Region's Resilience Against Extreme Weather Impacts

Eastern Maine continues to experience increasingly frequent and severe weather events that affect communities, businesses, infrastructure, and natural resources. Strengthening regional resilience through hazard mitigation, infrastructure investment, emergency preparedness, and strategic planning will reduce future risks while enhancing public safety, supporting long-term economic competitiveness, and promoting sustainable community development.

The region faces a range of natural hazards and environmental challenges, including flooding, coastal erosion, sea-level changes, severe storms, heavier precipitation, and temperature extremes. These hazards place growing pressure on transportation networks, utilities, public facilities, businesses, and municipal services, increasing the risk of infrastructure damage and economic disruption. At the same time, many communities face staffing and financial constraints that limit their capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from these events.

State initiatives, including the Community Resilience Partnership (CRP), provide municipalities with technical assistance, planning resources, and funding opportunities to strengthen local resilience and reduce future risks. Continued investment in hazard mitigation, infrastructure modernization, energy reliability, and regional collaboration will enhance the region's ability to withstand disruptions, recover more quickly, and support long-term economic prosperity.

Through its network of regional coordinators, finance coordinators, and service providers, as well as continued investments in renewable energy and outdoor recreation, Maine is strengthening the resilience of towns, Tribal communities, and municipalities while supporting sustainable economic growth and improving preparedness for future weather-related events.

Economic resilience extends beyond disaster response. It requires building the long-term capacity of communities, businesses, institutions, and infrastructure to anticipate, withstand, adapt to, and recover from economic disruptions. By integrating resilience into economic

development, land use planning, infrastructure investment, and workforce strategies, Eastern Maine can reduce risk while fostering a more competitive, sustainable, and prosperous regional economy.

Steady-State Resilience

Long-term resilience will be strengthened through investments that improve regional competitiveness before disruptions occur. These efforts include diversifying the regional economy, modernizing infrastructure, expanding municipal capacity, supporting entrepreneurship and brownfield redevelopment, improving broadband connectivity, and fostering innovation across manufacturing, forest products, agriculture, marine industries, and emerging technologies.

Responsive Resilience

EMDC will continue serving as the region's economic development convener during periods of disruption by coordinating technical assistance, grant administration, business recovery services, disaster recovery planning, and collaboration among federal, state, tribal, local, nonprofit, educational, and private-sector partners. Existing partnerships established through workforce development, comprehensive planning, floodplain management, brownfield redevelopment, and business assistance position the region to respond more effectively to natural disasters, economic shocks, public health emergencies, and other unforeseen events.

Regional Resilience Priorities

Implementation of this CEDS will strengthen economic resilience by:

- Modernizing transportation, broadband, utility, and community infrastructure.
- Expanding municipal planning and implementation capacity.
- Increasing business competitiveness through innovation and technical assistance.
- Supporting redevelopment of strategic sites and underutilized properties.
- Improving disaster preparedness, hazard mitigation, and recovery planning.
- Strengthening collaboration among public, private, nonprofit, tribal, educational, and governmental partners.
- Pursuing state and federal funding opportunities that enhance long-term regional competitiveness.

These investments will reduce vulnerability to future disruptions while improving the region's ability to attract investment, support business growth, and respond effectively to changing economic conditions.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Economic resilience and sustainability require continuous evaluation and adaptation. Through implementation of this CEDS, EMDC will monitor demographic trends, labor market conditions, infrastructure needs, business activity, industry performance, municipal capacity, and emerging economic risks to ensure regional priorities remain responsive to changing conditions.

Annual implementation reviews will enable regional partners to assess progress, identify emerging opportunities and challenges, refine priorities, and incorporate new funding opportunities into future work. This adaptive approach ensures the CEDS remains a living document that continues to inform regional decision-making and guide economic development investments throughout the planning period.

Potential Implementation Partners

- Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF)
- Maine Office of Community Affairs (MOCA)
- University of Maine
- Maine Technology Institute
- Maine Renewable Energy Association
- Efficiency Maine
- Island Institute
- Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF)
- Maine Department of Economic and Community Development
- Maine Department of Labor
- Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR)
- Office of the Public Advocate
- Regional utilities and renewable energy providers
- Municipalities, tribal governments, and regional planning partners

Strategies

Strategy #1: Strengthen Community Resilience

- Conduct regional resilience assessments.
- Identify vulnerable transportation, utility, and community infrastructure.
- Provide technical assistance to municipalities.
- Support participation in the Community Resilience Partnership.

Strategy #2: Advance Infrastructure and Energy Resilience

- Support development of hazard mitigation and infrastructure improvement projects.
- Assist communities with grant development for resilience initiatives.
- Encourage investment in resilient and sustainable infrastructure.
- Promote projects that strengthen energy reliability and reduce long-term operating costs.

Performance Measures

- Municipalities enrolled in the Community Resilience Partnership.
- Hazard mitigation projects completed.
- Critical infrastructure improvements implemented.
- Brownfield redevelopment projects completed.
- Flood resilience and weather adaptation projects supported.
- Alternative energy and resilience investments leveraged.

Five-Year Targets (by March 31, 2031)

- Assist at least 20 municipalities or Tribal communities with resilience planning, hazard mitigation, emergency preparedness, or infrastructure adaptation.

- Advance at least 10 resilience, energy reliability, flood mitigation, brownfield, or critical-infrastructure projects.
- Support completion or update of at least five continuity, hazard mitigation, or recovery plans.
- Leverage at least $15 million in public and private resilience and infrastructure investment.

Workforce & Education

Goal #4: Train, Retain & Attract Talent

A skilled, adaptable, and engaged workforce is essential to Eastern Maine's long-term economic competitiveness. The region benefits from a strong network of workforce development organizations, higher education institutions, career and technical education centers, adult education providers, apprenticeship programs, and employer partnerships that provide education, training, and career advancement opportunities. Together, these resources position Eastern Maine to respond to evolving labor market demands while supporting business growth, innovation, and economic resilience.

Leveraging these strengths will be critical as the region addresses workforce shortages, demographic change, and the retirement of experienced workers continue to challenge nearly every industry sector. Addressing these issues will require coordinated investments in education, workforce training, career awareness, work-based learning, and supportive services that reduce barriers to employment. Stronger collaboration among employers, educational institutions, and workforce development partners will help ensure training programs and curricula align with industry needs and equip workers with the skills most in demand.

Preparing the workforce for the future also requires expanding digital literacy, technology adoption, and artificial intelligence (AI) competency across industries. As emerging technologies continue to transform the workplace, workers will need opportunities to develop the technical, analytical, and problem-solving skills necessary to adapt and remain competitive in an evolving economy.

By investing in workforce development, employer engagement, lifelong learning, and talent attraction and retention, Eastern Maine will strengthen labor force participation, increase workforce productivity, and ensure businesses have access to the skilled workforce needed to support sustained economic growth and regional prosperity.

Strategy #1: Strengthen Education and Workforce Partnerships

- Expand collaboration between employers, educational institutions, and workforce organizations.
- Align education and training programs with regional workforce needs.
- Increase work-based learning opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training.
- Support industry-recognized credentials and career pathway development.

Strategy #2: Expand Workforce Participation and Skills

- Increase participation in workforce development programs.
- Expand digital literacy and AI literacy training.
- Promote lifelong learning and upskilling opportunities.
- Improve access to supportive services that reduce barriers to employment.
- Expand participation in the Maine Apprenticeship Program for skilled workers

Strategy #3: Attract and Retain Talent

- Promote Eastern Maine as a desirable place to live, work, and raise a family.
- Strengthen partnerships that support workforce recruitment and retention.
- Increase awareness of career opportunities within priority industry sectors.
- Support initiatives that connect students and new residents with regional employers.
- Connect workforce programs to business services

Potential Implementation Partners

- Maine Department of Labor
- State Workforce Board
- Northeastern Workforce Development Board
- University of Maine
- Eastern Maine Community College
- Career and Technical Education Centers
- Adult Education Programs
- Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG)
- Educate Maine
- Live + Work in Maine
- Maine Discovery Museum (MDM)
- Regional employers
- Chambers of Commerce

Performance Measures

- Individuals receiving workforce services
- Industry-recognized credentials earned
- Registered Apprenticeships created
- Businesses participating in workforce partnerships
- Employer engagement activities
- Labor force participation rate
- AI literacy and digital skills training participants

Five-Year Targets (by March 31, 2031)

- Provide workforce, career-navigation, training, or supportive services to at least 2,000 individuals.
- Support at least 1,000 industry-recognized credentials, training completions, apprenticeships, or other work-based learning outcomes.
- Achieve at least 800 employment placements, job retentions, or career advancements.
- Engage at least 80 employers in workforce partnerships, training development, apprenticeships, or work-based learning.
- Provide digital literacy or AI literacy training to at least 500 workers, job seekers, educators, or employers.

Businesses

Goal #5: Support the Growth of Existing Businesses & Attraction of New Businesses

Small business are the bedrock of Maine's economy with the business community the foundation of our resilient regional economy. Supporting the success of existing businesses while encouraging entrepreneurship, innovation, and new investment will strengthen Eastern Maine's economic competitiveness, create quality employment opportunities, and expand the region's tax base. Business growth depends upon a supportive ecosystem that provides access to capital, technical assistance, skilled workers, infrastructure, and collaborative partnerships.

Eastern Maine benefits from a network of business support organizations, lenders, educational institutions, industry associations, and economic development partners that help businesses start, grow, modernize, and compete. Continued investment in business technical assistance, entrepreneurship, access to capital, business succession planning, export development, and supply chain growth will strengthen existing industries while supporting emerging sectors including advanced manufacturing, forest products, the Blue Economy, healthcare, technology, defense, tourism, and value-added agriculture.

By leveraging existing and emerging tools for economic growth, fostering innovation, encouraging private investment, redeveloping strategic commercial sites, and supporting business expansion, the region will be in a better position to promote itself as an ideal location to start and grow a business. From its high quality of life and opportunities for outdoor recreation, to its strong sense of community and thriving tourism economy, the region is equipped with the amenities and resources it needs to foster greater entrepreneurship, job creation, and workforce attraction.

Strategy #1: Support Business Growth and Entrepreneurship

- Expand business technical assistance and mentoring services.
- Increase access to capital for startups and expanding businesses.
- Support entrepreneurship, innovation, and business succession planning.
- Promote redevelopment of strategic commercial and industrial sites.

Strategy #2: Strengthen Regional Business Competitiveness

- Expand opportunities for businesses to access government contracting, export markets, and new supply chains.
- Increase collaboration among businesses, educational institutions, industry associations, and economic development organizations.
- Promote business modernization, technology adoption, and productivity improvements.
- Support business attraction initiatives that build upon regional assets and target industry clusters.

Potential Implementation Partners

- Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD)
- Maine Small Business Development Centers (Maine SBDC)
- SCORE Maine
- Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI)

- Finance Authority of Maine (FAME)
- Maine Technology Institute (MTI)
- Maine International Trade Center (MITC)
- Maine Venture Fund
- Maine Center for Entrepreneurs
- University of Maine
- UpStart Maine
- Chambers of Commerce
- Financial institutions
- Regional economic development organizations

Performance Measures

- Businesses assisted
- Capital leveraged
- Jobs created
- Jobs retained
- Business startups
- Business expansions
- Procurement contracts secured
- Export assistance provided
- Brownfield redevelopment projects supporting commercial development

Five-Year Targets (by March 31, 2031)

- Provide technical assistance, counseling, procurement support, or financing assistance to at least 1,000 businesses and entrepreneurs.
- Close or facilitate at least 75 business loans or other capital investments.
- Leverage at least $15 million in public, private, and business capital.
- Support at least 80 business startups, expansions, successions, or commercial redevelopment projects.
- Support the creation or retention of at least 500 jobs.

Evaluation Framework

EMDC will use the evaluation framework to measure implementation of the CEDS and its impact on the regional economy. Progress will be reviewed annually with the CEDS Committee and reported through the CEDS Annual Performance Report. The review will compare actual results with the five-year targets identified under each goal, document projects and investments advanced, identify barriers or changing economic conditions, and recommend adjustments to strategies, partners, timelines, or targets.

During the first annual review, EMDC will confirm baseline values and responsible data sources for each measure. Data will come from EMDC program records, reports from partners and municipalities, state and federal labor and economic datasets, and documentation for individual projects. Measures will include implementation outputs such as communities and businesses assisted, plans completed, projects advanced, and funding leveraged. Measures will also include regional outcomes such as jobs created or retained, housing units produced or preserved, credentials earned, employment outcomes, private investment, and infrastructure improvements.

CEDS Evaluation Framework

Action Plan Evaluation Framework

Housing	Achieved	In Process
Create a Regional Housing Committee		
Expand on the Housing Roadmap		
Identify Housing Gaps & Develop Strategies for Improvement		
Increase Housing in Underserved Areas		
Increase Regional housing Capacity that prioritizes affordability		

Transportation		
Develop a Regional Needs Assessment		
Support the Improvement & Upgrade of Roads & Bridges		
Increase Public Transportation Network & Infrastructure		
Identify Gaps in Existing Network		
Promote the Benefits of Rail Improvements to Businesses & Communities		
Promote the Benefits of Port Infrastructure to Businesses & Communities		
Develop a Business Survey to Assess Air Freight Needs		

Resilience		
Develop a Regional Resilience Needs Assessment		
Identify Building & Transportation Infrastructure of Key Concern		
Provide Specialized Technical Assistance to Municipalities		
Enroll Municipalities in the Community Resilience Partnership		
Assist with Grant Development for Projects that Support Alternative Energy Generation and Resilience		
Encourage Investments in Sustainable Infrastructure		

Workforce & Education		
Develop Ongoing Survey to Determine Training Needs & Skills Businesses Seek		
Promote & Provide Educational & Training Opportunities for In-Demand Industries		
Support the Increase of Micro Credentialing and Certification Programs		
Develop Survey to Gauge Digital Literacy Skills		
Provide Digital Literacy Skills Training		
Promote & Increase Regional Assets & Amenities		
Increase Participation in Workforce Services Programs		

Businesses		
Promote Opportunity Zones		
Promote Department of Economic and Community Development Business Site Selection Tool		
Develop Economic Initiatives		
Provide Increased Support for Rural Business Entrepreneurs		
Increase Number of Businesses that Hire Workforce Services Participants		
Increase Number of Businesses Connected with Impact Lending Programs		

Economic Resilience in Practice

Eastern Maine's economy has surpassed emergency pandemic relief and into a phase of steady recovery and growth. By 2024–2025 employment in Maine reached record levels even as the statewide unemployment rate held around 3.2–3.4%, reflecting an unusually tight labor market. Notably, an influx of new residents since 2020 helped offset retirements and bolster the workforce. EMDC shifted its efforts from short-term crisis loans to long-term economic development.

In 2023 it launched the Economic Recovery Implementation Hub (in partnership with the state) to provide technical assistance, training, and grants to small businesses founded after January 2020. By early 2025 the program had already awarded over $1 million to dozens of local start-ups, fostering innovation and resilience in small firms. At the same time, EMDC and its partners accelerated infrastructure and planning projects. Tourism and service sectors are rebounding as well - industry surveys report that visitor volumes have largely returned to about 2019 levels. These data-driven strategies and partnerships suggest the EMDC region is navigating the post-pandemic era with renewed adaptive capacity and sustainable economic strength.

Workforce Recovery

Recognizing the relationship between recovery and economic opportunity, EMDC has continued to play a leadership role in developing workforce solutions that help individuals reenter the labor force while addressing regional workforce shortages. Through partnerships with Maine state government, regional workforce development boards, employers, and community organizations, EMDC helped establish the statewide Connecting with Opportunities Initiative, a federally funded workforce development program designed to connect individuals affected by substance use disorders with education, skills training, career counseling, supportive services, and employment opportunities. This meets the needs of businesses looking for workers.

Since its launch, the initiative has served hundreds of participants across Maine, including many within Hancock, Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Washington counties. Participants have accessed industry-recognized training, career navigation services, transportation assistance, childcare support, and other resources that reduce barriers to employment. The program has also strengthened the region's workforce by supporting careers in healthcare, behavioral health, and recovery support professions, while expanding opportunities for individuals with lived experience to serve as peer support specialists and workforce mentors.

Although statewide overdose deaths have declined from their peak in recent years, substance use continues to affect labor force participation, employer recruitment, housing stability, and overall community well-being. Continued collaboration among workforce organizations, healthcare providers, educational institutions, employers, and local governments will be essential to strengthening the regional workforce and expanding pathways to stable employment.

Workforce Housing

There are 271,106 people in this region, making up 19.4% of the State's population (Maine State Economist, 2023). Our EDD is projected to grow to a population of just under 276,445 in 2032. The number of households in the EDD are also projected to grow, along with the median age, and the average household size continues to get smaller. Housing units are predominantly single-unit and owner-occupied, characteristics which are not projected to change going forward.

A significant factor in the decrease in housing affordability is the persistent undersupply of homes. Even before the pandemic, Maine's housing market faced years of limited production. The post-2008 period was marked by exceptionally low levels of new construction, contributing to an aging housing stock and an inadequate supply of quality homes for new and returning residents (Garcia, 2024). The pandemic accelerated these existing trends and brought their effects into sharper focus.

Maine's Housing Production Needs Study estimated that Maine faced a deficit of approximately 38,500 housing units, with projections indicating a need for an additional 37,900 to 45,800 homes by 2030 to accommodate future demand. This brings the total number of new homes needed to as many as 84,300 within the next seven years. Without housing they can afford, individuals also lack access to healthcare, education, and job opportunities, all of which are essential to actively participate in the economy. Steady out-migration and an increasingly aging population highlight the region's need to be able to increase its housing supply to retain and increase the size of the current workforce. To take advantage of any promising developments, we must be able to provide job seekers with access to housing they can afford. A diversified stock of housing supports a wide variety of individuals at different income levels. To maintain and enhance economic diversification, access to housing is critical for the attraction, retention and resilience of the region's workforce and greater economy.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI), including generative AI, is rapidly transforming how work is performed across industries and occupations. As businesses increasingly adopt AI to improve productivity, automate routine tasks, support decision-making, and enhance customer service, workers across all sectors will require new competencies to effectively and responsibly use these technologies. Consistent with the U.S. Department of Labor's AI Literacy Framework, AI literacy is emerging as a foundational workforce skill alongside digital literacy. Preparing workers, employers, educators, and workforce providers for AI adoption through coordinated education, training, and employer engagement will strengthen regional competitiveness, support business innovation, and ensure Eastern Maine's workforce is equipped for the evolving economy. Rather than face replacement, future workers will use AI to boost potential to make them more effective in their jobs. By expanding AI literacy across the workforce system, supporting employers in adopting AI responsibly, and strengthening partnerships to address emerging workforce needs, the region can adapt to this new technology and thrive.

Innovations and the Blue Economy

Shipbuilding, fishing, and working waterfronts have long defined Maine. Today, the state has a significant opportunity to expand its Blue Economy by leveraging coastal assets, research institutions, marine industries, advanced manufacturing capabilities, and its entrepreneurial

ecosystem. Strategic investment in commercial fisheries, aquaculture, value-added seafood processing, ocean technology, marine transportation, and emerging renewable energy supply chains will help diversify the regional economy, create high-quality jobs, and strengthen long-term economic resilience. As part of the region's broader business development and innovation strategy, EMDC will support the continued growth of marine-related industries while fostering collaboration among businesses, educational and research institutions, manufacturers, and public partners. As Maine accelerates growth in its ocean economy, it must also preserve working waterfronts and the maritime livelihoods they support. EMDC will seek opportunities to collaborate with the Maine Center for the Blue Economy, the University of Maine's Maine Aquaculture Research, Innovation and Education (MARINE) initiative, and other statewide partners to strengthen research commercialization, business development, workforce initiatives, and investment in emerging ocean industries. Complementary investments in workforce development, infrastructure, and community resilience will further position Eastern Maine to capitalize on opportunities across the Blue Economy.

Former Wastewater Treat Lagoons at One North

Mill Site Revitalization

Several municipalities in the EMDC region are former mill towns, left with empty industrial sites that once generated significant economic activity. Instead of allowing these empty buildings to languish, several towns have sought and been awarded millions of dollars in Brownfields funding for the purpose of assessment and remediation. Previously productive sites, such as Lincoln, Millinocket, and East Millinocket, are reactivating what once were the hearts of their communities to attract new businesses and revitalize their economies.

Former Wastewater Treat Lagoons at One North

In Millinocket, One North is developing a land-based recirculating aquaculture facility designed to produce 10,000 metric tons of Atlantic salmon annually and create more than 80 jobs. EMDC's work with these communities to transform former mill sites into active industrial parks is strengthening regional partnerships and creating new opportunities for investment and job growth. East Millinocket is continuing a thorough and transparently documented cleanup process supported by millions of dollars in funding, including an EPA Brownfields grant and a Northern Border Regional Commission

(NBRC) grant. Multiple buildings on the 215-acre site could be adapted for new businesses and industries.

In Lincoln, these funds represent a first step toward broader economic development and are expected to support road and utility improvements, construction and operation of an industrial wastewater facility, and rail improvements. Lincoln continues to advance the redevelopment of its former mill site as a regional hub for forest products, advanced materials, alternative energy, value added food manufacturing, and information technology, supported by approximately $21 million in brownfields assessment and remediation investment. Recent biofuel and battery storage activity, together with the planned Innovation Center, will bolster the region's existing education and workforce system, foster business development and entrepreneurship, and strengthen the pipeline of industry ready workers. These investments will extend the site's economic impact beyond Lincoln by creating new opportunities for businesses, workers, and communities throughout the region.

Summary Call to Action

Through the identification of goals and measurable strategies, the 2026 EMDC Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy presents an approach to support long-term economic prosperity in the EMDC region. By leveraging regional assets and opportunities, the region will be in a better position to minimize weaknesses and mitigate threats to economic growth. Improving the connectivity of people and affordable and fair access of goods and services is essential for attracting and retaining the workforce the region needs. From greater regional collaboration to increased support for alternative energy advancements, rural entrepreneurship, and innovation, the regional economy will experience the growth it needs to become a more vibrant, resilient, and maintainable economic environment to support communities and businesses in the years to come.

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