

Feasibility Analysis for the Proposed Ellsworth Strategic Transportation and Recreation Center

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Contact Information

Prepared by the Hancock County Planning Commission

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Introduction

- Executive Summary

This proposal summarizes the process for conducting a twelve to eighteen month feasibility analysis for a multimodal passenger facility in Ellsworth, Maine, hereafter referred to as the strategic transportation and recreation (or STAR) center. The proposal identifies informational needs, principal analytical elements, key participants and technical resources, and the desired outcomes of the planning process. The feasibility analysis will support decision makers in deciding whether the facility should be built, what services should be provided by the facility, and several potential financial resources.

- Background

Ellsworth stands at the crossroads in Hancock Counties for two primary arterial highways. Route 1A connects north-south traffic between Bangor and Mount Desert Island and Route 1/3 provides east-west travel between Maine's mid-coast and Washington County. Traffic volumes and seasonal traffic congestion reach their peak on High Street in the business center of Ellsworth. Non-automotive alternatives, such as intercity bus services have been very limited and have had little impact on reducing traffic congestion in Ellsworth.

The Calais Branch Rail corridor parallels Route 1A connecting Bangor and Ellsworth, then turns East running parallel with Route 1 through Washington County. The rail corridor became inactive in 1985 after many years of declining demand for freight movement and many more years with no passenger service. The state of Maine purchased these rail assets and has attempted on several occasions to identify sufficient demand to restore freight or passenger operations. During the ensuing years MaineDOT and volunteer organizations have worked to preserve the aging rails and ties, but several sections continue to suffer from routine flooding and erosion of the rail bed. Two key decisions have been made recently to reestablish this corridor for long-term sustainability and use. The rail connection between Brewer and Washington Junction, east of Ellsworth was leased to the Downeast Heritage Preservation Rail, Inc. for restoration and use as a seasonal excursion service. Approximately 82 miles of tracks from Washington Junction to Ayers Junction, west of Eastport, will be removed and a multi-use trail established under the direction of the Maine Department of Conservation. A four-mile rail-with-trail corridor will be established connecting Ellsworth High School, High Street in Ellsworth and the dedicated multi-use trail in Washington Junction.

Regional transit operations have grown significantly during the 1990s and 2000s, with the creation of the Island Explorer bus system under the umbrella of Downeast Transit, Inc. While seasonal use of transit services has risen dramatically on Mount Desert Island, Ellsworth and the balance of Hancock County experienced declining use of regional busing services. Commuter use of bus services, on the other hand, has increased in this decade and shows promise for future gains as major employers and institutions encourage employees to ride the bus.

Changing demographics point to new possibilities for non-automotive travel through the region, including the immanent retirement of the baby-boom generation, and a rising population of long-distance commuters and seasonal foreign guest-workers accustomed to using transit services.

Changing economics may also provide new demand for non-automotive travel including rising fuel prices, increasing levels of international tourism and Ellsworth's rapidly growing retail and service sector. As with the Ellsworth Crossroads, the Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce serves a pivotal role providing visitors with information for the entire two-county region. The crush of seasonal volume of traffic on High Street and the high density of road side signage can discourage visitors from seeking and finding traveler information at this critical juncture.

- Memorandum of Understanding

Key organizations have met for more than two years to discuss opportunities to enhance traveler services in Ellsworth, including City government, the Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce, the Downeast Rail Heritage Preservation Trust, the Sunrise Trail Coalition, the Maine Department of Transportation and the Hancock County Planning Commission. Recognizing the need for better non-automotive transportation options and the economic opportunities presented by the proposed excursion rail and multi-use trail, these organizations created a memorandum of understanding that outlines critical needs in the region and agreeing to work together to create a new multi-modal transportation facility in Ellsworth to meet these needs. The memorandum follows.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

between

The City of Ellsworth,

The Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce

The Downeast Rail Heritage Preservation Trust

and

The Sunrise Trail Coalition

Revised: 3/23/07

This Memorandum of Understanding by and among the City of Ellsworth, Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce, the Downeast Rail Heritage Preservation Trust and the Sunrise Trail Coalition is agreed by the parties for the purpose of creating a shared facility for a Downeast regional visitors center and trailhead for the Down East Sunrise Trail, Ellsworth Area Chamber offices, and a Downeast Scenic Railroad depot and museum.

This agreement establishes a partnership that commits personal and fiscal resources as authorized by each of the partners towards the study of the feasibility of the proposed facility. Such a facility will not only strengthen our individual efforts, but also serve as a model for public-private collaboration. Our vision for this project is that it:

- Advances the City of Ellsworth's plans to improve the mobility, safety and walkability of High Street and contributes to Ellsworth as a quality lifestyle community.
- Provides for a proposed permanent home for the Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce in a central location from which it will serve the region.
- Creates a facility from which to operate the Downeast Scenic Railroad and to house Downeast Maine's first railroad museum.
- Establishes a regional visitors' center and trailhead for the Down East Sunrise Trail that will serve as a gateway to Downeast Maine.
- Establishes a park-and-ride and intermodal transit facility.

In order to make this vision a reality, all partners commit to:

- 1) Assist with locating and securing private and federal funding for site acquisition, analysis, planning and development.
- 2) Contribute technical and/or administrative assistance for partnership planning, fundraising and site development.
- 3) Keep abreast of partnership activities and meet on a regular basis to brief partners on action items and plan next steps.
- 4) Build awareness and support of the project through whatever outreach tools the partner has available, including web sites, newsletters, email list serves, cable TV, special events and presentations.
- 5) Notify the partnership of activities that could influence facility development, Calais Branch line rehabilitation and trail construction.
- 6) Develop a business plan governing the usage and management of the facility.

Upon termination of participation by any party to this agreement, the terminating party agrees that all funds placed with the partnership shall remain with said entity. Notice of termination of participation shall be given no less than 60 days preceding the date of termination.

The terminating partner shall make no demand or seek no redress from a court of law to reclaim said funds and freely forfeits all claims to any participation, either as a participant in oversight and decision making or monetarily.

The termination of participation by any partner shall not cause or be made to cause the dissolution of the entity and its mission and this agreement shall survive the termination of participation by any partners save one, in its entirety, until the remaining partners otherwise suspend, void, negate, transfer or dissolve the partnership and its mission.

Signatories to this agreement shall make as part of the record of this partnership and Memorandum of Understanding board resolutions from their respective boards and/or oversight authority approving and authorizing their financial commitment and authority to participate and represent their respective agency, municipality, or organization within the prescribed mission set forth in this document and of this partnership.

Public Participation Plan

- Ensuring Public Awareness and Participation in Planning

The STAR Center feasibility analysis will benefit in several ways from methodical public outreach. In order to maximize our local resources, the feasibility study must begin with a public participation plan that outlines core planning committee members, additional stakeholders, a process for providing public information and receiving public comment and identifying future stakeholders for program implementation should this project pass the feasibility test.

- Planning Committee Support

The signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding, along with technical support from the Maine Department of Transportation, Maine Department of Conservation and Hancock County Planning Commission form the core planning group for the proposed STAR center.

- Stakeholders Communications

The feasibility analysis will further document support from neighboring local governments, business organizations, non-profit organizations, transportation providers and interested citizens. This wider circle will be regularly informed of planning activities, public meetings and encouraged to read draft planning documents through a web-page devoted to this analysis, regular email contact.

- Public Outreach

Several public meetings will be required in the course of this feasibility analysis. Three core public outreach meetings will include an initial scoping session, a preliminary concept presentation and a final concept presentation. Scoping will provide the public an opportunity to provide ideas for what this center would mean to them and some of the services they want to see. The conceptual design meetings will provide the public with the opportunity to understand and comment on the proposed facility. While the feasibility stage will not include preliminary or construction engineering, the conceptual designs will identify of core services, alternatives for generalized landscape and facilities designs and proposed ancillary activities.

Needs Analysis

The primary objective of this step is to identify the scope of services that the proposed STAR center can provide and project demand for these services. This is an iterative process, beginning with an initial list of services, gauging local support and estimating demand, reconfiguring the list and re-testing public support and market demand.

- Program Planning

The memorandum of understanding provides a list of anticipated services.

- Improved mobility, safety and walkability of High Street contributing to Ellsworth as a quality lifestyle community.
- Home for Ellsworth Area Chamber of Commerce
- Facility for Downeast Scenic Railroad and Downeast railroad museum
- Trail head for Down East Sunrise Trail
- Park-and-ride and intermodal transit facility

Additional opportunities will be identified at this stage, including ancillary business uses, new transportation and information services. Information gathering will include interviewing potential facility users, requesting specific information about their space requirements, service plans and projections of facility use.

- Demand Analysis and Forecasting

New integrated facilities present challenges for accurate forecasting of market demand. This is particularly the case when services are currently provided through a patchwork of facilities or not-at all. The feasibility analysis will draw on several types of information to forecast demand. Meta-analysis of comparable facilities in other locations will provide a general scope of potential demands. These findings can be scaled to the Ellsworth context with existing data such as traffic counts, business sales tax trends, bus ridership, and Chamber of Commerce visitation. This study will take advantage of several detailed traffic analyses that have been conducted in recent years to support other transportation proposals. Recent out-of-state surveys of tourism needs will be incorporated as possible to project future use. If existing studies and secondary data cannot answer our questions about future demand, a customer survey will be designed and implemented as possible under the approved budget.

The products of this stage will include estimates of needs for services such as parking, information floor space, bus frequency and ridership, excursion rail ridership and trail use. In addition to use, this stage will include projecting potential revenues from on-site and ancillary facilities. These projected demands will be subjected to sensitivity analysis relating to demographic changes, tourism trends and changes in relative modal costs for travelers.

Inventory and Analysis

- Location Analysis and Mapping

In order to proceed with site selection, the planning committee will prepare a list of weighted criteria for site selection. These criteria will be used to identify the most promising general areas in Ellsworth for the facility.

The stage will include a thorough analysis of the larger area that could satisfy location imperatives and optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of the facility. Field work will involve walking potential areas with a global positioning system to identify site specific features that may not already be digitized.

Geographic Information Systems will be employed to overlay a large number of transportation, land use, environmental, demographic and economic characteristics. The GIS process will assist

the planning committee to determine a short list of feasible sites and will be used when appropriate for public informational meetings and the project website. Site strengths and weaknesses will be identified and environmental issues will be highlighted. This process will result in a prioritized short list of feasible sites.

- Systems Planning

This stage organizes much of the research in the earlier stages into a series of chapters devoted to specific systems needs for the region as they relate to the proposed facility. These include Transit, Excursion Rail, Traffic, Sidewalk, Bikeway and Trail, Park and Ride, Visitor information Dissemination, Chamber of Commerce and Environmental Systems. Each system will be identified with organizational charts, inputs and outputs, key providers and consumers (as appropriate) and potential for symbiosis or conflict with the other systems. For example, the traffic system will consider traffic flow into the facility, requirements for connections to the local and state road system and entrance permit requirements. Some systems, such as traffic, will require input from specialists as well as the planning committee, the Ellsworth Planning Department and MaineDOT.

Analysis of Alternatives

Up to this stage most of the work has been conceptual, with only limited reference to the future management and physical design of the proposed intermodal facility. Several alternatives will have emerged with respect to location, service mix and scale of operation. This stage will codify a limited number of alternative development scenarios and will provide information for the committee and stakeholders to base a decision on which alternative or alternatives to pursue in greater detail.

- Business Plan

The committee has expressed the need to identify functional organizational models for the intermodal facility. Critical questions about ownership and management will be addressed at this stage. The feasibility of the entire project hinges as much on these basic business questions as any other element of the proposal. The business plan will identify opportunities for public-private partnerships, inter-local agreements, public and private finance and maintenance options. Opportunities for ongoing revenue generation by the facility will be compared with operating cost estimates in the format of alternative pro-forma budgets.

- Architecture and Land Use Concept

As noted earlier, the feasibility analysis will not result in a final design or engineering for facility. However, we propose to engage the services of a landscape architect in creating alternative conceptual plans for land use and facilities designs. Input from the planning committee, stakeholders and the public will assist the technical staff to refine the concept and turn our “systems” into tangible facilities.

- Ranking alternatives

Project staff will present the alternative concepts to the planning committee, stakeholders and the public to test market the multimodal facility. Criteria, identified earlier, will be employed to rank each alternative against multiple objectives, such as meeting consumer demand, maximizing environmental compatibility and reducing traffic congestion on High Street. The outcome of this stage will be a preferred alternative, if any exists.

Project Gantt Chart

- See attached

Budget

- See Attached