

Downeast Coastal Corridor Scenarios (2025)

1. Energy Led Development

Hancock and Washington Counties have adapted to the decline of fossil fuels with a variety of large and small energy initiatives that have boosted the region through direct, indirect and induced economic diversification.

Tidal Power: has moved from experimentation to implementation, with several cutting edge tidal generators operating off of the Washington-Hancock coastline. Tidal power is very predictable, but produces far less close to peak high and peak low tides.

Wind Power: generators are now located in a number of our windy locations as well as several experimental off-shore wind farms. Wind power is not predictable, and as a result is being balanced by other power generation infrastructure. Surplus powers is used to split water into oxygen and hydrogen, helping to support the growing demand from hydrogen fuel cells powered homes and transportation.

Biomass: Biomass generators, primarily burning scrap wood and solid waste provide important balancing assets for the wind and solar systems that operate only under some weather conditions.

LNG: A liquid natural gas facility has been constructed and feeds natural gas from tanker ships to a regional gas pipeline. Some of this LNG is used, along with the biomass to balance energy generation with the wind and tidal power facilities.

Geothermal: technologies have improved for geothermal heating systems, now installed in new homes that reduce the need for fossil fuels to meet heating demands.

Transmission: Several new transmission lines have been installed to carry electricity from generators to the regional and larger New England pool (NEPool). These transmission lines have also created new corridors for recreational uses.

Surplus energy in the region is marketed to the New England Pool, bringing much needed revenues to eastern Maine. This surplus has also reduced local energy prices making this region more competitive for energy intensive manufacturing, including paper and wood products, granite mining and manufacturing, high-tech greenhouse production and more.

The transportation impacts of the first wave of energy development are primarily manifested in transmission wires and gas pipelines. Subsequent demands for transportation infrastructure have included hardened roads to move manufactured goods, particularly wood and granite products and access roads to the facilities.

2. Tourism and Seasonal Resident Growth and Diversification

Tourism continues to be a major economic activity for Hancock and Washington Counties. Demands from tourists and seasonal residents have changed however. The aging boomer generation created a significant increase in demand for vacation and recreation services, but that is now waning. The subsequent generations of tourists are each expressing their interests in new ways.

Several aspects of eastern Maine continue to draw visitors and seasonal residents.

Natural resource based recreation: Traditional activities like hunting and fishing continue, but are balanced by larger numbers of visitors that use photography, video-graphy and remote sensing technologies to experience our woods and coastlines. Trail systems provide more opportunities for the younger generations to experience being in nature. Water based recreation is more popular than ever with kayaking, canoeing, sailing, and other boating being made available through local rental businesses. Acadia National Park remains one of the regions primary destinations, but is now better integrated with state parks, public reserve lands and regional trails.

Heritage Tourism: Older visitors take more interest in visiting the region to learn about our history and cultures. Many historic homes operate as bed-and-breakfast facilities and integrate education with recreation.

Transportation impacts of tourism are no longer manifested through the demand for more and wider roads, but rather the integration of numerous modes and facilities. International tourists are the leading edge of demand for well integrated transit and rental services, but initially reluctant Americans are now using our inter-modal systems to visit eastern Maine car-free. While most visitors still arrive by private automobile, much of the increase in tourism is coming through expanded transit services, ferries, cruise ships and trail riders.

Seasonality of tourism and residence continue to be a challenge. The aging boomers have helped to push the fall shoulder season through October, but tourism all but disappears between November and May. Transportation demands follow suit, with some stress on capacity during peak summer, but underutilization during the winter and spring months. Seasonality is a particularly difficult challenge for transit providers, many of which are learning to operate vehicles in southern tourism centers in these off months.

3. Health and Human Services

The social and economic fabric of Hancock and Washington Counties is shifting. The most fundamental patterns causing this shift are lower numbers of births, net out migration of young adults, and a steadily aging residential population.

As a result, school enrolments continue to drop putting pressure on rural school districts to merge. The pressure on rural school bus systems continues to increase with longer trips to between widely scattered rural homes and the remaining schools. Some schools are forced to drop bus services to outlying areas, putting pressure on parents to drive their children to school or turn to alternatives such as home schooling or leaving the region.

On the other end of the age spectrum, the population over 70 years of age is growing steadily as baby boomers over-run existing rural health care and social services. This population is also pressing up against the constraints of the rural transit system. Routine trips to Bangor for treatment of chronic diseases cannot be accommodated by the skeletal fixed route regional bus system and puts tremendous pressure on the network of rural volunteer drivers. Higher gasoline prices and the need to work longer hours have reduced the number of people able to be volunteer drivers.

New solutions are needed to solve these compound problems.

The necessity of getting the most out of limited resources has encouraged towns to work together to provide transportation services. School buses are now used routinely to move children and adults whenever possible. Volunteer drivers are far better organized than in the past, and are receiving reimbursements that help them to cover all of their costs. The internet has become a valuable tool for coordinating transportation and social service. Interactive web pages make it easier for people to find transportation services, but also to articulate their needs to transportation providers.

Towns have each designated sheltered bus stops where people can wait for regional and school bus services without being exposed to rain, wind and snow. Health care providers, retirement communities and local voluntary organizations have coordinated their fleet vehicles to provide more frequent scheduled trips and rural point to point connector services.

Health care providers have also increased the breadth of chronic care services available in secondary and tertiary service centers. Regional clinics are supported by area hospitals and provide regular visits from nurse practitioners as well as telemedicine appointments with doctors.

4. Transportation Diversification

Washington and Hancock Counties have seen steadily increasing options for movement of people and freight over the past 20 years.

Transit: For passenger movement a coordinated effort for improved transit operations now provides daily bus service to the Route 1 corridor from Calais to Bucksport and connecting through Bangor and Belfast to points south and west. Regional carriers have streamlined their routes and schedules to avoid competition in favor of collaboration to optimize coverage to service centers. Bus maps and online schedules provide passengers with complete information, including connections among local, regional and intercity transit services. Other communities and the outlying services centers are served through ride-sharing, rural taxi services and on-demand transit for special needs populations. The Island Explorer is a model for low-polluting rural transit services. Multimodal transportation centers now exist in Bucksport, Ellsworth, Trenton, Machias and Calais.

Trucking: Ongoing improvements to Route 1 and Route 9 permit easier integration of trucking and automobile use. Additional passing lanes, climbing lanes, pull offs and paved shoulders help truckers to meet tight carrier deadlines.

Rail: Freight rail service has been restored connecting the Eastport shipping terminal with Calais through Ayers Junction. This rail connection facilitates movement of bulk goods and container goods, the latter being able to move between the US and Canada through seamless rail connections and technologically advanced, automated security scans.

Water Transportation: Passenger services along the water are operating to close a few gaps where water transportation is more efficient. The Bar Harbor to Winter Harbor ferry service continues to operate and carries commuters as well as tourists. Scheduled water transit services also operate between Lubec and Eastport. On demand water taxi services are available between Belfast and Castine. The year-round outer islands in Hancock County have streamlined ferry services to create predictable seasonal and year round services that can operate in most weather. Calais, Lubec, and Eastport see increasing cruise ship visits during the summer. Bar Harbor retains a strong presence from cruise ship visits.

The “blue highway” concept of interregional shipping is starting to take hold along the eastern seaboard. Eastport and Bucksport have emerged as the two primary freight ports in Washington and Hancock Counties. Sand, gravel, cut granite, wood products and paper drive export shipping while a variety of manufactured goods now arrive by ship.

Air Transportation: While the Bangor International Airport continues to be the primary airport in eastern Maine, the Bar Harbor Hancock County Airport in Trenton continues to operate as a regional carrier with significant private use and scheduled passenger services. The greater Machias regional airport has opened and provides offers private and scheduled regional air services.

Bicycle and Pedestrian: Energy costs have motivated people to live closer to school and work and to combine use of transit services with walking and bicycling. The Downeast Sunrise Trail has become a regional corridor for bicycle tourism and connects numerous village areas, including Ellsworth, Franklin, Cherryfield, Harrington, Whitneyville, Machias, and East Machias. The service centers have all see significant improvements to their sidewalk infrastructure, and now encourage children to walk and bicycle to school to the extent possible.

5. Status Quo

Maine has largely retained its share of national economic growth, but the distribution of growth has been uneven. Hancock County continues to grow on pace with the state, with population increases declining to approximately ½% per year, while Washington County population has grown more slowly with some years of declining population. Both counties continue to experience significant seasonal fluctuations in employment, due in large part to reliance on tourism and summer residence as economic centers.

Transportation demands continue to fluctuate seasonally with moderate congestion in the summer months and underutilization during winter and spring months. Higher fuel prices and consequential lower levels of consumption have reduced somewhat the demands on roads, but have increased demands for alternative transportation services. Lacking public strategic investments, private operators have stepped forward with piecemeal solutions to meeting customer demands. New transit services come and go, with mixed results. The regional airports have struggled for survival, primarily operating for private owners. Residents wishing to travel by air drive to Bangor, and frequently to Portland and further to seek lower air fares.