Small Rural Town Revitalization in Maine:
Test Pilot of the SEED Model

by Nory B. Jones and Manuel Wörsdörfer

ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Ecosystem Economic Development (SEED) model is a methodology designed to facilitate revitalization in small towns and rural communities. During the 2023–2024 academic year, our team of faculty advisors and students served as project champions to implement a pilot test of this model, leveraging the unique expertise and resources of relevant stakeholders to support a small town in rural Maine. The approach included communication and relationship-building with the town manager and stakeholders, a knowledge summit to discern needs and capabilities, an iterative process of resource-needs mapping, and providing deliverables based on the town's requirements with sustainable practices.

INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of economic development is to create vibrant, thriving communities with a high quality of life, characterized by decent jobs, sound educational and healthcare systems, a lively town with shops, restaurants, and interesting cultural venues, as well as good infrastructure (Koirala et al. 2023). One of the primary questions in this context is: How can a declining small rural town reverse its fortunes and become a thriving community that attracts businesses and residents?

The literature is replete with research on models and theories to accomplish this reversal. Some focus on the impacts of government assistance, such as tax incentives, grants, or zoning. Others focus on the quality of life and community factors. Recently, several studies have addressed the issue's complexity, including socioeconomic, regulatory, and sustainability issues. Much research explores the role of ecosystems in encompassing all those factors into continually evolving systems (Brenton and Slawinski 2023; Nimick and Ndu 2024). Furthermore, the issue of sustainability has been studied in greater depth, as climate change and the significance of the triple-bottom-line elements are recognized as significant contributors to the potential well-being of small rural towns (Gila Herald 2025; PSC 2011).

Our pilot test aimed to explore the role of sustainable ecosystems in the economic development of a small rural town in decline (i.e., Fort Fairfield, Maine) using the Sustainable Ecosystem Economic Development (SEED) model.[1] The SEED model integrates the knowledge and expertise of relevant stakeholders from various areas, including government agencies (federal, state, and local), for-profit and nonprofit organizations, communities, and project champions, who are similar to traditional project managers, focusing on planning, communication, facilitation, and implementation.

Our research questions were

- What is the role and responsibility of a project champion in the management and success of town revitalization efforts?
- How crucial is socio-environmental sustainability in fostering economic development for a small rural town experiencing decline?
- Can the SEED model effectively aid in revitalizing a small rural town in decline (in our case, Fort Fairfield)?

IMPORTANCE OF SMALL TOWNS

Rural areas have historically been the foundation of the United States and its culture. As the country's economy has evolved from one based on agriculture to one based on industry and, more recently, high-tech and digital industries, small towns in rural areas have undergone different transformations. Some small rural towns successfully adapted to these changing trends, while others stagnated. Many still have not overcome the barriers of inadequate broadband Internet infrastructure or a lack of expertise and resources needed for revitalization. Many have faced a downward spiral when large industries, such as paper mills in rural areas like

Maine, close, and the towns struggle to fill the significant job gap that results (Peters 2024; US EPA 2025). Consequently, many residents leave to seek decent jobs, while small businesses close, and towns deteriorate (White 2022). According to Johnson (2022), over the period from 2010 to 2020, more than two-thirds of all rural areas in the United States experienced population loss.

Similarly, the departure often includes small, community-oriented businesses such as restaurants, shops, and lodging, which are essential for generating revenue and creating jobs within the community. Towns deteriorate due to a chicken-and-egg situation, where they lack the necessary infrastructure to attract new residents, and small businesses are hesitant to invest because of a lack of potential customers. Other common challenges include a lack of financial resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs, as well as inadequate broadband internet (Pipa 2024, SBM 2021, Valentín-Sívico et al. 2023).

Research indicates that rural areas can benefit from developing a vibrant small business and entrepreneurial community, as this fosters job creation and generates wealth that remains within the community, often enhancing the social fabric and revitalizing the town (Love and Powe 2022). Many small rural towns have abundant natural resources with excellent nature-based tourism activities, representing significant potential to entice tourists. Thus, they have the potential for revitalization strategies essential for the social, cultural, and economic well-being of rural areas. Again, overcoming this chicken-and-egg situation is the main challenge. White (2022) suggests that small rural towns can create synergistic ecosystems by attracting creative and entrepreneurial individuals who appreciate natural outdoor resources, thereby promoting town growth. A more detailed examination of small-town revitalization is presented in the appendix.[2]

PROJECT CHAMPIONS, ECOSYSTEMS, AND COLLABORATIONS

A significant tenet and unique aspect of the SEED model is the vital role of the project champion (another crucial part is ecosystems or collaborations among relevant stakeholders). Like a traditional project manager, a project champion is critical to facilitating the ecosystem's development, logistics, and successful implementation. The term project champion differs from the traditional project manager in the psychological aspect of becoming the chief cheerleader for the project.

Research has shown that many entrepreneurs and small business owners lack awareness of the resources needed to survive, grow, and prosper. One study found that about 50 percent of small business respondents were unaware of the organizations available to help them with their business. About 80 percent indicated they did not receive assistance to start their businesses. Studies also found a correlation between education and the success of small businesses and entrepreneurs (Nimick and Ndu 2024). This correlation infers the need for a project champion to manage the stakeholder ecosystem—i.e., develop and implement the project's communication, logistics, and implementation—to support small businesses and town revitalization efforts (Masuda et al. 2021).

Regarding ecosystems, the term *creative abrasion* refers to creating an ecosystem of people with differing expertise, perspectives, ways of thinking and analyzing, and knowledge to facilitate innovation. This diversity in thought and understanding leads to creative synergies, new ideas, and thus innovation and more successful outcomes. Therefore, a significant part of our SEED model relies on creating diverse but highly engaged stakeholders to create greater value from their contributions (Leonard and Straus 1997).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

At the beginning of the SEED model test project (when conducting the SWOT analysis), Undiscovered Maine sent a questionnaire to Fort Fairfield's town manager, asking him about the town's strengths and weaknesses and his goals and priorities during his tenure as manager. Among the latter were growing the economy and tax base; stabilizing the budget and rebuilding faith/trust in local government; supporting and strengthening town employees' connection with the community and role competency; investing in critical infrastructure and seeking out improvements to enhance the quality of community life; seeking opportunities to increase the housing stock and population; expanding broadband; and developing additional attractions and events to draw more visitors.

When asked about what citizens of Fort Fairfield want or need in terms of economic growth and sustainable development, the town manager replied that there is a "strong desire to see industrial development," reduce tax burdens, and increase job opportunities. He also mentioned that it is essential to "strike (the right) balance between tax burden and the need for public services" such as police and fire departments, emergency medical and management services, and public works. He also wants to "see Main Street come back to life with a mix of businesses, shops, and restaurants" and to continue investing in schools and public education.

According to the town manager, Fort Fairfield's strengths include Main Street, schools, proximity to Aroostook County population centers and Canada, the Aroostook River, abundant farmland and water resources, outdoor recreation opportunities, and reasonably priced homes and land.

Additionally, the town manager mentioned opportunities worth exploring, such as creating more access points to the Aroostook River for fishing and recreation, incubating businesses on Main Street, using less productive land for other agricultural uses (beyond the large-scale potato industry), and promoting housing development.

Like other rural areas in the United States, Fort Fairfield also faces several challenges including, climate change, the ongoing AI revolution, and the so-called digital and social divide, as well as the medium- to long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Climate change poses significant challenges for all major tourism destinations. In the case of Aroostook County and Fort Fairfield, global warming will (most likely) decrease snow cover and ice formation, which will negatively affect many winter outdoor recreation activities, such as snowmobiling and skiing. Ticks and mosquitoes are also expected to thrive in a warming climate, which might cause diseases and affect people's physical and mental well-being (MCC STC 2024). Climate change adaptation and planning are thus crucial, especially for Maine's tourism areas dependent on natural assets vulnerable to climate change. The goal must be to reduce climate change vulnerabilities and enhance the adaptive capacity and resilience within nature-based tourism destinations, which means reducing the carbon footprint of the outdoor/recreation industry while simultaneously fostering sustainable economic development (Horne et al. 2022).

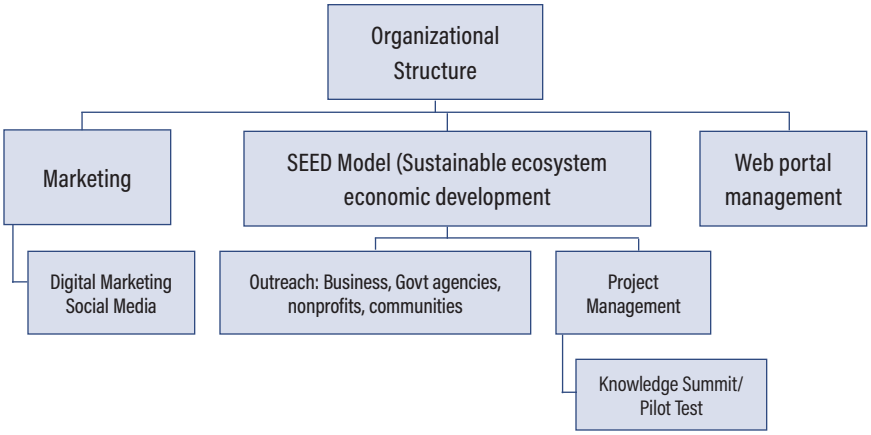
The AI revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic present both opportunities and challenges for Fort Fairfield. Like many other rural communities, Fort Fairfield also faces the challenge of attracting talent, entrepreneurs, and businesses. In theory, plenty of opportunities for remote work exist in the Aroostook region, especially given the (relatively) low living and housing costs. Yet, the town lacks an adequate (technological) infrastructure, including reliable, high-speed internet access. Financial capital needs to be invested in local infrastructure to not only close the digital and social gap (Wörsdörfer 2018), but also to realize local ideas and transform such areas into thriving communities. Universities such as the University of Maine and the University of Maine at Presque Isle could also play a vital role in this community development process, transforming rural assets and building a rural innovation economy. That is, technology transfer from local universities could (ideally) lead to rural (tech) startups (Hardy 2024).

SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES

A recent study by the Maine Climate Council revealed that the past four years, from 2020 to 2023, were the warmest on record, characterized by increased precipitation and more frequent weather extremes. According to the report, "the past four years in Maine (2020–2023) have ranked among the ten warmest on record" (MCC STC 2024: 8) The report goes on to suggest that warming will affect agriculture and human health and safety through increasing mosquito and tick-borne diseases, and economic and social impacts.

Climate change is already causing problems in Fort Fairfield. A significant part of their winter revenue comes from snowmobiling tourism. A study Hathaway et al. (2020) showed snowmobiling contributed $606 million to the state economy during the 2019 season. However, according to an interview with the Fort Fairfield town manager, during the 2023–2024 winter season, snowmobile registrations declined from 90,000 to 60,000. He also stated that the lack of snow had significantly reduced visitor numbers and, consequently, town revenues. Similarly, ski areas, especially those in southern Maine, have seen significantly less snow, which has negatively affected their revenues. Revenues from ice fishing are also negatively affected. The famous annual Can-Am Crown International Sled Dog Races were canceled in 2024 due to insufficient snow, exacerbated by heavy rainstorms (Ramirez 2024; Russell and Overton 2024).

FIGURE 1: **Organizational Structure of Undiscovered Maine**



Sustainability can help mitigate the negative impacts of climate change and is critical in revitalizing small rural towns. Sustainable rural development involves the balanced development of the triple-bottom-line elements: economic, environmental, and social sustainability (Elkington, 1997). Special responsibility rests with the project champion, the local community, and other stakeholders (Rakitovac et al. 2021). A more detailed exploration of the different aspects of sustainability can be found in the appendix.

METHODS

Undiscovered Maine—A UMaine Student Club

Undiscovered Maine is a University of Maine/Maine Business School (MBS) student club founded in 2012 by Nory Jones. The club's goal is to increase tourism and economic development in underrepresented or underserved regions of Maine. It aims, in particular, to have a positive impact on rural communities in distress by building a solid social media presence and fostering partnerships with regional businesses and other stakeholders. In doing so, students learn valuable skills in digital marketing and social media, web portal management, project and organizational management, strategy, and outreach.

At the center of the club's 2023–2024 activities was the SEED model pilot test project with the town of Fort Fairfield. Club members conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of Aroostook County and Fort Fairfield and organized a knowledge summit with government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses. The students also revised the Undiscovered Maine website, created a marketing plan, and identified opportunities for nature-based tourism in and around Fort Fairfield. These efforts supported the town's revitalization efforts and raised awareness for the project and promoted the club's work.

The club's work was supported throughout the academic year by various stakeholders including government agencies (federal and state), nonprofits, and small- and medium-sized enterprises. Notable federal agencies included the USDA Rural Development and the US Small Business Administration. More details on these stakeholders are available in the appendix. The club's engagement with the various stakeholders and partners followed the steps outlined in LISC (2021), starting with identifying and organizing the stakeholders, setting shared intentions, mapping the small-business ecosystem of Fort Fairfield, mobilizing targeted action (and developing an action plan), building both internal and external capacity, fostering and managing the community of practice, developing shared accountability systems, developing social capital partnerships, and integrating the work with broader economic development efforts.

To test and implement the SEED model in Fort Fairfield, Undiscovered Maine focused on two projects and goals: (1) fostering nature-based tourism, e.g., via leveraging the Aroostook River and other nature-based assets such as the International Appalachian Trail; and (2) supporting the ongoing revitalization efforts of Fort Fairfield's Main Street. The details of this implementation are provided in the appendix.

Understanding Fort Fairfield

Fort Fairfield is a small town in Aroostook County, Maine. It is situated along the US-Canada border (bordering New Brunswick) and, according to the 2020 census, has a population of roughly 3,300.[3] The town is known for its annual Maine Potato Blossom Festival and County Bluegrass Festival. Other places of interest include the Blockhouse Museum, which displays artifacts from the Aroostook War of 1838–1839 over the international boundary between New Brunswick and Maine,

the Historic Friends Church, the Fort Fairfield Railroad Museum, the McIntosh One-Room School House, the Riverside Pavilion and Park overlooking the Aroostook River, the Aroostook Valley Country Club, a golf course that spans Maine and New Brunswick, and the International Appalachian Trail.[4]

Like many rural US towns, Fort Fairfield has its town councilor(s), manager, and an economic and community development department. The council also collaborates closely with the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, Aroostook County Tourism, and the Northern Maine Development Commission, all of which are part of Undiscovered Maine's stakeholder partners. Lastly, Fort Fairfield boasts a thriving Amish community that offers a diverse range of handmade crafts, furniture, baked goods, and more.[5] Additional information on Fort Fairfield can be found in the appendix.

RESULTS

Project Champions and Small-Town Revitalization

The results of this project demonstrated the need for a project champion to plan, organize, facilitate, communicate, and implement a sustainable ecosystem for small-town revitalization. These stakeholders brought necessary financial and other resources, capacity, knowledge, and expertise to the revitalization project to create a coalition or ecosystem of relevant stakeholders. Thus, the project champion played a vital role in developing this crucial collaborative.

According to the Institute for Project Management, communication is essential for project success (Minois 2024). Results from this project support this assertion. As the project champion, our role was to maintain consistent communication with stakeholders. We communicated with them individually at the beginning and as needed throughout the project. We sent weekly update emails, responded to questions, communicated regularly with the town manager, coordinated and communicated with all stakeholders for major meetings, provided follow-up notes and addressed queries, and maintained open communication throughout the process. This level of communication would not have happened without our team acting as the project champion. As project champions, we also used consistent communication to determine goals, scope, time management, logistics, and deliverables.

AROOSTOOK RIVER REGION OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Educating stakeholders, including recreational users, about the socioeconomic and ecological benefits provided by the area[6]
- Establishing nature-based youth and recreational programs
- Organizing guided bird watching and paddling tours
- Encouraging best management practices for agriculture, forestry, and logging around vegetation removal, soil disturbance, and construction activities
- Maintaining or restoring intact and healthy forested buffers along the river to protect water quality and conserve valuable wildlife habitat
- Maintaining or restoring the area's natural hydrology
- Working with public and private landowners to encourage sustainable forest management practices and to secure a permanent conservation status for unprotected significant features in the area
- Collaborating with regional, state, and federal agencies to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., offering consultancy and funding opportunities for nature-based tourism).[7]

Environmental and Social Sustainability

The Aroostook River Region encompasses a river, numerous islands throughout its meandering channel, and extensive floodplains. It uniquely combines natural (marine) ecosystem communities, wildlife habitats, and rare animal species and plants (Maine DIFW n.d.). From a sustainability perspective, the area provides several ecological and economic services. Among its ecological services, the river region provides habitat for sensitive or rare species, including state-endangered plants (Fries' pondweed), reptile species of special concern (wood turtles) and globally rare dragonflies (pygmy snaketail), as well as for natural communities and ecosystems that support regional biodiversity. Among its economic services, the area attracts nature-based tourism such as bird watching, paddling, hunting, and fishing.

In addition to its natural resource assets, Fort Fairfield possesses significant social capital, understood in terms of community cohesion and trust. It has a rich local culture and history. Culture as an asset (i.e., the cultural identity of the town and region) could complement nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation (Hardy 2024).

Fort Fairfield is also home to the International Appalachian Trail (IAT). The IAT is a geographically widely

dispersed network of (loosely connected) walking trails worldwide. Hiking the trail allows people to enjoy the scenic landscapes of Aroostook and the neighboring counties, to boost their physical and emotional well-being, and to learn new things about the regional ecosystem and culture. Fort Fairfield could consider creating more detailed physical and digital maps, brochures, and road signage for the IAT to market the trail better. It could also brand itself as the gateway or entrance to American leg of the IAT (as seen from a Canadian perspective). Integrating the trail into local events and festivals or combining it with other river activities (such as The First Fort Fairfield IAT River Race) might also boost the local economy and attract more visitors.

Effectiveness of the SEED Model

One of the main goals of the SEED model test project was to use the expertise and resources of the various stakeholder partners, which we did by gaining support and commitment from highly experienced representatives from relevant government agencies, for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and the Fort Fairfield town manager. The first team meeting was designed to create a shared understanding and mission for the project. It also allowed the different stakeholders to develop trust in the team and interact independently with the town manager. The weekly email updates provided status reports and allowed the stakeholders to weigh in when they had knowledge or resources to share. The knowledge summit enabled stakeholders to share their valuable knowledge and expertise with the town manager and address specific goals and priorities.

Each stakeholder brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the town's revitalization efforts that could not be found elsewhere. The knowledge summit and subsequent meetings enabled stakeholders and the team to work collaboratively for nearly four months. By this time, members of the team had shared their knowledge, and the mission and scope had been refined. Thus, the knowledge summit and similar meetings represented a synergistic collaboration of creative abrasion, where all stakeholders could contribute valuable and relevant knowledge to address the town's revitalization issues and indicate possible ways to overcome the respective challenges.

In the context of small-town revitalization, the team specifically focused on entrepreneurship and innovation. The club created a Town Revitalization Resource Document featuring over 25 programs for expertise and funding (see Appendix G). It also ran two ideation sessions to foster innovation and entrepreneurship, generating an idea bank of 81 ideas related to retail, food, events, outdoor and indoor recreation, tourism, and other opportunities. This process began in late January 2024 with an internal *brainstorming* session, during which club members discussed innovative ideas for Fort Fairfield. Those ideas were grouped into eight categories: tourism, food, culture, cross-border cooperation, family and kids, infrastructure, finance, and demographic challenges (Appendix E).

A create session followed the brainstorming session in February. The narrative presented to the club members was as follows:

> Fort Fairfield is a community in Aroostook County, Maine. At one point, it was a vibrant town on the Aroostook River. Through a series of events that decimated the downtown area, along with shifting industries, Fort Fairfield has experienced a significant decline in its economic activity and population. To not only maintain Fort Fairfield but also return it to a thriving community, we need to bring more business to Fort Fairfield.

At the center of the discussion was the question of how to attract new residents, encourage homegrown businesses, and attract (new) companies to Fort Fairfield. Such ideas could include products, services, systems, and innovations.

After the create session, the club held an ideation session in March, which led to a so-called mind map. Some of the major ideas included examples of popular restaurants, recreational activities, and infrastructure ideas (see the appendix for the entire mind map). The next step included creating an idea bank, which was completed at the end of March. The primary goal was to attract entrepreneurs and small businesses to Fort Fairfield and address the issues of housing and business blight. Ideas were categorized into the following groups: types of companies important for all small towns, retail, food, and supporting businesses and activities.

These ideas were integrated with the club's stakeholders' knowledge, expertise, and resources (through several stakeholder and discussion forums, which allowed the collaboration partners to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement). This led to a list of (possible) events, indoor and outdoor activities, and tourism-related ideas. Additional deliverables can be found in the appendix, including a resource bank and a discussion of supplementary resource programs.

FIGURE 2: **Fort Fairfield Revitalization System**

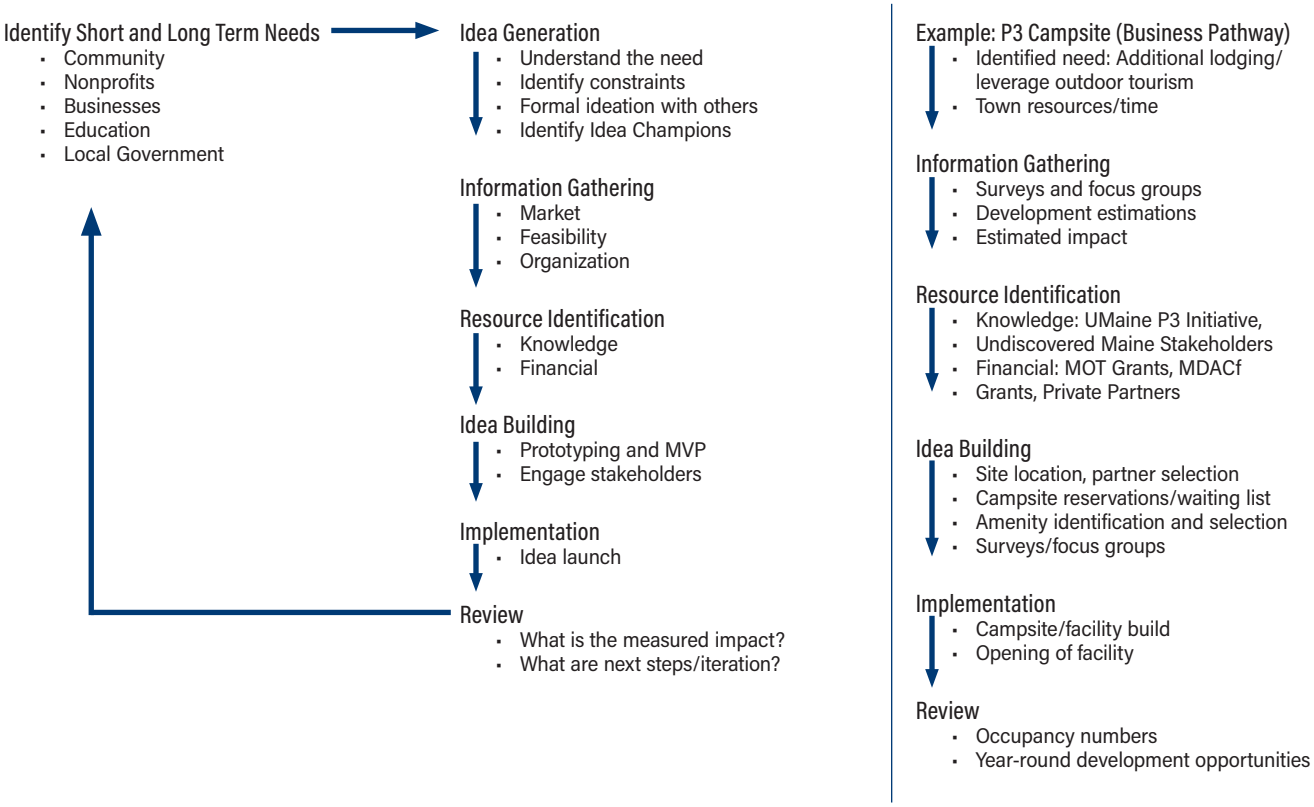


Figure 2 summarizes the revitalization system deliverable as applied to Fort Fairfield. The first step was identifying the community's short- and long-term needs. Ideas were then generated using brainstorming and other techniques. Additional information was gathered from stakeholders and collaboration partners, and the existing and missing resources of Fort Fairfield were identified. The generated ideas were launched, and possible review methods were illustrated. An example of each of those steps is included in the figure below.

Over the 2023–2024 academic year, the club successfully created a synergistic ecosystem of diverse stakeholders from multiple government, state, and local agencies, as well as for-profit and non-profit organizations, and the town manager, who provided the knowledge, expertise, and resources needed to support Fort Fairfield's revitalization efforts. Additionally, club members learned how to successfully create and implement the role of project champions to communicate, plan, organize, and implement this ecosystem and learned how to work in a consulting capacity with the town manager to identify, communicate, and provide deliverables for his priorities.

These deliverables included a web portal to promote use of the Aroostook River to increase usage by visitors and residents; a business system to help with planning for revitalization efforts, especially related to entrepreneurship and innovation; a resource bank to help navigate the different agencies and resources; and a marketing plan to help with the goal of attracting visitors, new residents, and small businesses and entrepreneurs.

DISCUSSION

This pilot test aimed to determine whether the SEED model could assist a small rural town in its revitalization efforts. The literature review demonstrates that many small rural towns worldwide face deterioration, population decline, and significant challenges in attracting and retaining the businesses and people necessary to maintain their vibrancy and thrive. The SEED model represents a viable methodology to help these small towns by creating an ecosystem of diverse

stakeholders with the knowledge, expertise, and resources to revitalize them.

What did we learn from this project? We learned that project champions are crucial for a small-town revitalization project like ours. It was particularly necessary for effective communication in persuading the town manager and stakeholders to dedicate some of their valuable time and resources by demonstrating the value of the project. Similarly, consistent and relevant communication throughout the project was crucial in keeping all stakeholders informed, demonstrating tangible progress, and facilitating open communication among them. The role of project champion is rarely explored in research on small-town revitalization. However, our pilot project shows the crucial role and responsibility of them in successful revitalization efforts. Furthermore, we showed that the SEED model can be viable for small-town revitalization efforts. Creating a sustainable and synergistic ecosystem of relevant stakeholders represents a means of developing the creative abrasion necessary to achieve successful outcomes through the combination of expertise, knowledge, and resources.

We believe this project successfully helped the town manager navigate the (occasionally) overwhelming and confusing alphabet soup of agencies and resources. We noted that creating relationships in this ecosystem allowed the town manager to work with stakeholders who could provide resources and assistance to meet the town's specific needs. We also noted significant synergies among the different stakeholders. During and after the meetings, they would build upon each other's knowledge and resources to create greater value for the client. The SEED model thus appears suitable for small-town revitalization, particularly when the project champion serves as a facilitator.

This project, however, represented a small pilot test. The major limitation was the time constraints of the faculty members, students, stakeholders, and the town manager. The logistics and implementation of working with the town manager and a group of nearly a dozen different stakeholders, who had other commitments, represented additional challenges. Future research could follow up to determine whether our deliverables contributed to achieving the goals of increased tourism and town revitalization. This would involve conducting marketing research to examine tourism, small businesses, and entrepreneurial interests in Fort Fairfield, as well as implementing the proposed town revitalization and marketing strategies. The Undiscovered Maine student club will continue its research on economic development. The plan is to grow the organization and use the SEED model to work with this or other towns or specific businesses in the region.

NOTES

1 https://umaine.edu/undiscoveredmaine/seed-model/

2 The appendix is available online: https://doi.org/10.53558/yhhc4663

3 https://censusreporter.org/profiles/06000US2300325615-fort-fairfield-town-aroostook-county-me/

4 https://mainepotatoblossomfestival.com/; https://www.fortfairfield.org/play-here/; https://www.visitaroostook.com/event/county-bluegrass-festival; https://iat-sia.org/

5 https://www.fortfairfield.org/live-here/visitor-information/amish-community/

6 Raising awareness and sensitizing stakeholders (e.g., making river shore communities and other local groups aware of the potential threat of invasive animal and plant species).

7 Maine Business School has created its own Social Impact Plan. The plan focuses on goals 8 (decent work and economic growth) and 11 (sustainable cities and communities) of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (https://sdgs.un.org/goals). It thus aims to promote rural economic well-being, provide education, research, and outreach activities relevant to rural contexts, and prioritize engagement on the role and impact of sustainability in businesses. The Undiscovered Maine project with Fort Fairfield fits neatly into this description as it helps promote goals 8 and 11.
For more information on possible conservation opportunities, see Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Beginning with Habitat (https://www.maine.gov/ifw/fish-wildlife/wildlife/beginning-with-habitat/index.html) and Maine Department of Environmental Proctection, Natural Resources Protection Act (https://www.maine.gov/dep/land/nrpa/).

8 The questions were framed or grouped into tactical considerations (i.e., financial reserves in local Economic Development Corporation, limited freely available housing stock, Main Street in Fort Fairfield has fiber connectivity, partnerships with local and state groups for resources and expertise), key insights, and market-, wisdom-, technology-, and future-related.

REFERENCES

Brenton, Jennifer, and Natalie Slawinski. 2023. "Collaborating for Community Regeneration: Facilitating Partnerships in, Through, and for Place." *Journal of Business Ethics* 184: 815–834. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05365-5.

Elkington, John. 1997. *Cannibals with Forks. The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business.* Oxford, Capstone.

Gila Herald. 2025. "Why Sustainable Practices Are Essential for Small Town Communities and Their Growth." *Gila Herald,* August 19. https://gilaherald.com/why-sustainable-practices-are-essential-for-small-town-communities-and-their-growth/.

Hathaway, Ian, Jessica Leahy, and Mindy S. Crandall. 2020. "The Economic Contribution of Snowmobiling in Maine." https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/sfr_studentpub/2.

Hardy, Jean. 2024. "Transforming the Rural Asset: Advancing Rural Place Through Cultural Assets in the American High-Tech Economy."

Community Development 55(6): 823-841. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2023.2301704.

Horne, Lydia, Sandra De Urioste-Stone, Parinaz Rahimzadeh Bajgiran, and Erin Seekamp. 2022. "Understanding Tourism Suppliers' Resilience to Climate Change in a Rural Destination in Maine," *Tourism Planning and Development* 21(5):614–635. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2022.2083222.

Johnson, Kenneth. 2022. *Rural America Lost Population Over the Past Decade for the First Time in History.* Carsey Research National Issue Brief #160. University of New Hampshire. https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/rural-america-lost-population-over-past-decade-first-time-history.

Koirala Samjhana, Paul M. Jakus, and Philip Watson. 2023. "Identifying Constraints to Rural Economic Development: A Development Guidance Function Approach." *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* 38(3): 461–482. https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.322850.

Leonard, Dorothy, and Susaan Straus. 1997. "Putting Your Company's Whole Brain to Work." *Harvard Business Review* (July–August). https://hbr.org/1997/07/putting-your-companys-whole-brain-to-work.

LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation). 2021. *Building Equitable Local Ecosystems for Small Business.* https://www.lisc.org/our-resources/resource/building-equitable-local-ecosystems-small-business/.

Love, Hanna, and Mike Powe. 2022. "Rural Small Businesses Need Local Solutions to Survive," Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rural-small-businesses-need-local-solutions-to-survive/.

MCC STC (Maine Climate Council Scientific and Technical Subcomittee). 2024. *Scientific Assessment of Climate Change and Its Effects in Maine: 2024 UpdateMCC STC.* https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/STS_EXSUM_2024.pdf.

Maine DIFW (Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife). n.d. "Focus Areas of Statewide Ecological Significance: Aroostook River—Washburn to Presque Isle." https://www.maine.gov/dacf/mnap/focusarea/factsheets.htm.

Masuda, Hiromi, Mahesti Okitasari, Kanako Morita, Tarek Katramiz, Shimizu Hitomi, Shun Kawakubo, and Yatsuka Kataoka. 2021. "SDGs Mainstreaming at the Local Level: Case Studies from Japan," *Sustainability Science* 16:1539–1562. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-021-00977-0.

Minois, Nadege. 2023. "The Importance of Communication in Project Management," Institute of Project Management, October 20. https://instituteprojectmanagement.com/blog/the-crucial-role-of-communication-in-project-management/.

Nimick, Logan J., and Ikechukwu Ndu. 2024. "A Critical Analysis of the Small Business and Startup Community in the U.S. State of Maine: A Sustainable Way Forward." *Journal of Applied Business and Economics* 26(1): 34–49. https://doi.org/10.33423/jabe.v26i1.6809.

PSC (Partnership for Sustainable Communities). 2011. *Supporting Sustainable Rural Communities.* US EPA. https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2011_11_supporting-sustainable-rural-communities.pdf.

Peters, Drew. 2024. "East Millinocket Officials 'Bringing Life' Back into Historic Paper Mill." *News Center Maine,* October 14. https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/local/east-millinocket-great-northern-paper-mill-maine/97-b3fff6c4-efbd-42e4-adc1-8392488bf133.

Pipa, Anthony F. 2024. *The Unique Challenge of Bringing Broadband to Rural America.* Brookings, June 4. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-unique-challenge-of-bringing-broadband-to-rural-america/.

Rakitovac, Kristina Afric, Alen Belullo, and Moris Ivancic. 2021. "Community Participation in Local Economic Development." In *Economic and Social Development: 68th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development,* edited by Marco Andre da Silva Costa, Abdelhamid Nedzhad, and Danijela Lucic, 136–145.

Ramirez, Rachel. 2024. "Longest Sled Dog Race in Eastern US is Canceled Because There's Not Enough Snow." *CNN,* February 27. https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/27/climate/maine-dog-sled-race-canceled-climate/index.html.

Russell, Eric, and Penelope Overton. 2024. "Mild Winter Takes a Toll on Maine's Outdoor Sports, Seasonal Economy," *Portland Press Herald,* March 31. https://www.pressherald.com/2024/03/31/lack-of-snow-and-ice-takes-toll-on-maines-outdoor-sports-seasonal-economy/

SBM (Small Business Majority). 2021. "Small Businesses Struggling to Access Capital, Harming Their Financial Recovery." *Small Business Majority,* February 17. https://smallbusinessmajority.org/our-research/access-capital/small-businesses-struggling-access-capital-harming-their-financial-recovery.

US EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). 2025. *How Small Towns and Cities Can Use Local Assets to Rebuild Their Economies.* EPA 231-R-15-002. https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/how-small-towns-and-cities-can-use-local-assets-rebuild-their-economies.

Valentín-Sívico Javier, Casey Canfield, Sarah A. Low, and Christel Gollnick. 2023. "Evaluating the Impact of Broadband Access and Internet Use in a Small Underserved Rural Community." *Telecommunications Policy* 47(4): 102499. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2023.102499.

White, Katherine. 2022. "Small Town and Rural Economic Development: A Case Study Analysis of Strategies for Success." *SPNHA Review* 18(1): 9. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spnhareview/vol18/iss1/9/.

Wörsdörfer, Manuel. 2018. *Engineering and Computer Ethics.* Dubuque, IA: Great River Learning.

Nory Jones is a professor of business information systems and security management at the University of Maine Business School. Her research and teaching focus on knowledge management, small rural business revitalization, cybersecurity, innovation, e-business, sustainable competitive advantage, and digital business transformation.

Manuel Wörsdörfer is an associate professor of management and computing ethics at the Maine Business School and the School of Computing and Information Science, and an associate member of the AI Initiative at the University of Maine. His research centers on business and human rights, particularly political CSR, and on AI ethics with a focus on big tech and antitrust.