

Development Ready Advisory Committee (DRAC)

Development Readiness Toolkit

August 20th, 2026

11:00AM

Kickoff Meeting Agenda

Working Group Directive

- **Purpose:** Develop a practical, Maine-specific development readiness toolkit that helps municipalities assess their current capacity, identify gaps, and take actionable steps to improve readiness for development.
- **Focus:** Create a simple, practical framework that helps municipalities assess their development readiness, identify barriers, and take realistic steps.
- **Early Output:** A municipal self-assessment checklist, a quick-start guide for local officials, a consolidated inventory of existing guidance and tools (from Maine and other states)
- **Goal:** Help municipalities understand their readiness, identify barriers, and determine practical steps to advance development.

Time	Topic	Purpose
10 min	Welcome & Introductions	Quick introductions: • Name, organization, title, something fun you did this summer
5–10 min	The “why” / shared problem	Ground the group in the current challenge: • Municipalities have varying levels of capacity and readiness to support development, while existing guidance and assessment tools can be fragmented, difficult to apply, or not tailored to Maine communities. • What is your perspective on this challenge?
5 min	Define success	What would “development ready” look like in practice for Maine communities? What would a successful toolkit enable municipalities to understand, prioritize, and act on?

15 min.	NMDC Community Pulse Tool (Example of Existing Guidance/Tools)	Introduce the Community Pulse tool as an example in Aroostook County (self-assessment, trends, recommendations, etc.) Brief demonstration and discussion of potential applications and relevance for this group. NMDC is continuing to accept feedback.
20 min	Working group discussion: What Should the Toolkit Address?	Invite perspectives on the most important dimensions of development readiness, existing tools/guidance that should be incorporated, and gaps the toolkit should address. Key questions: • Where do municipalities experience the greatest challenges or uncertainty in preparing for development? • What factors should be included in a practical readiness assessment—planning, permitting, infrastructure, staffing, workforce, communication, etc.? • How should the toolkit account for differences in municipal size, capacity, and resources? • What existing municipal or other-state tools provide good models? • If we could help municipalities improve 2–3 things through this effort, what would have the biggest practical impact?
5 min	Approach & working model	• Meeting cadence, and how the group will make/input recommendations • Schedule regular meeting (poll to come)

		• Meeting virtually for 6 months • February delivery date on recommendations to DRAC
5 min	Wrap-up & next steps	Recap decisions, assignments, immediate next steps, and confirm next meeting

Working Group Member List

- **Kevin Sutherland** (Working Group Chair), Newcastle Town Manager
- **Marina Tomer** (DRAC Policy Lead), Resilience Collaborative Program Manager, Maine Office of Community Affairs
- **Averi Varney**, Executive Director, Hancock County Planning Commission
- **Jay Kamm**, Senior Planner, Northern Maine Development Commission
- **Erin Quetell**, Land Use & Transportation Planner, Lincoln County Regional Planning Commission
- **Hannah Huston**, Project Manager/Community Development Specialist, Northern Maine Development Commission
- **Jennie Franceschi**, Asst. City Administrator, City of Westbrook
- **Ian Gorecki**, Community Planning & Scoping Manager, Department of Transportation
- **Howard Carter**, City of Saco, Water Resource Recovery Department Director
- **Chris Cossette**, Superintendent, Wiscasset Water District
- **Gabe Gauvin**, Program Manager, Maine Redevelopment Land Bank
- **Jeremy Gabrielson**, Director of Conservation Planning, Maine Coast Heritage Trust
- **Tanya Emery**, Advocacy Manager, Maine Municipal Association
- **Steven McDermott**, Senior Program Officer, The Genesis Fund
- **Dan Black**, Partner, LB Development Partners
- **Christopher Quint**, Director Maine State Workforce Development Board

Kickoff Meeting Notes:

8/20/2026

In Attendance:

- **Kevin Sutherland** (Working Group Chair), Newcastle Town Manager
- **Marina Tomer** (DRAC Policy Lead), Resilience Collaborative Program Manager, Maine Office of Community Affairs
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Action items for working group members:

- Please send Marina any additional example resources that would be helpful to point to in the toolkit or explore collectively as a group.
- Fill out scheduling poll for future meetings.

Working group plan:

- Hold six meetings over the next six months to identify existing resources, showcase tools that are already working, and determine what should ultimately be included in the toolkit. Recommendations will be shared to the full DRAC in February.

Why Is a Development Readiness Toolkit Needed?

- There is a wide variation in municipal capacity across Maine. Some communities have economic development or planning staff, while others rely heavily on regional planning organizations, Councils of Governments, nonprofits, or volunteers. Some communities have access to significant outside expertise, while others have very limited capacity and resources to address development.
- This disparity creates challenges when development opportunities arise. There may be a site or project that a community could benefit from, but no time or expertise to administer a program, navigate the process, or connect the community with available resources.
- The resources available through regional planning organizations also vary. For example, KVCOG and NMDC offer different services and have different capacities. This makes it **difficult to develop a single approach that assumes every community has access to the same level of support.**
- Existing guidance is fragmented and difficult to apply, especially in rural and lower capacity communities. Communities are simultaneously trying to navigate municipal planning, capital planning, housing, infrastructure, environmental considerations, recruitment, and right-sizing. **The toolkit should help communities think about these issues as an interconnected system.**

Predictability and Development Review

- A major theme was the need for **greater predictability and consistency in local development processes.**
- The way approvals are administered can vary considerably between municipalities and planning boards. For developers, this can make it difficult to understand what is expected, what steps are required, and how long the process may take. It can also take significant time to interpret local requirements.
- Many planning boards and other decision-making bodies are made up of community volunteers. These volunteers are being asked to navigate increasingly complex development issues, often without significant technical expertise or staff support.
- **The goal is not to take away local control.** Rather, communities should have **clear and accessible processes** that explain how decisions are made and what is expected of applicants.
- A toolkit could provide a static, online resource that helps communities document and communicate their processes.

- Simply creating a toolkit will not be enough. The **governance structures and local processes that implement it also need to be aligned with the goal of creating predictable and understandable development review.**
- Some development processes can involve numerous meetings (participants shared personal experience with a process involving 14 meetings). There may be opportunities to better establish expectations about what the reviewing authority is responsible for and where processes can be made more efficient.

What Does "Readiness" Mean?

- The recent Maine Town, City and County Management Association (MCTMA) meeting helped reinforce the importance of defining what **community readiness** actually means.
- Participants expressed interest in a toolkit that could help communities assess their readiness and identify questions they should be asking developers.
- There was also interest in better defining what is meant by "development" as a key foundational step to help communities early in the development process.
- Helpful resources from Michigan:
 - [Redevelopment Ready Communities | MiPlace](#)
 - [Redevelopment Ready Communities Library | MiPlace](#)

Potential components of development readiness include:

- Having appropriate municipal staff or access to outside expertise.
- Understanding local demographic, housing, and economic conditions.
- Having clear planning and zoning policies that identify areas of opportunity.
- Understanding infrastructure capacity.
- Having predictable development-review processes.
- Understanding environmental and conservation considerations.

- Having elected officials and volunteer boards prepared to engage with development proposals.
- Having already had community conversations about growth and the future of the community.

An opportunity for the toolkit is to capture the tangible elements of readiness that are not currently being captured in most communities and are not readily available/compiled in one place.

Defining Development and the State's Role

- This working group needs to be clear about what types of development the toolkit is intended to address.
- Eastport and Ellsworth were mentioned as examples of communities that have been active in responding to development pressures, including through moratoria. **There may be particular types of development where there is a strong connection to state policy and interest, especially housing.**
- The group discussed the importance of **thinking critically about where state policy and local development priorities overlap and where the state could provide useful support.**
- This also raised a broader question: **Where do we want development to occur?**
- The toolkit should not simply be about facilitating development. It should **help communities think strategically about where development is appropriate while also considering forests, conservation priorities, infrastructure, and community character.**

Raising the Baseline for Communities

One of the potential roles of the toolkit is to **raise the baseline level of knowledge and sophistication available to communities.**

Municipalities may need help answering basic questions such as:

- What approvals are required?
- What is considered shoreline?
- How long might environmental review take?
- Which state agencies are involved?

- What does a developer need to provide?
- What should a planning board be asking?

The toolkit could provide a starting point for these questions and direct communities to the appropriate subject-matter experts when more specialized assistance is needed. The intent is not for every municipal official or volunteer to become an expert in every aspect of development. Rather, the toolkit should help them understand **what they need to know, when they need to know it, and where to find help.**

Community Conversations Should Happen Before a Project Is Proposed

- The group discussed the importance of helping **communities have conversations about growth before a specific development proposal is on the table.**
- Once a project has been proposed, conversations can quickly become focused on perceived threats or losses. It is much easier to have **productive conversations about what a community wants when there is not an immediate project creating pressure.**
- These conversations could help communities establish a shared understanding of:
 - What they want their community to look like.
 - Where they want growth.
 - What types of development they want.
 - What infrastructure they have or need.
 - What aspects of community character they want to preserve.

The state could potentially support these conversations through funding for roundtables, charrettes, or other facilitated community planning activities. The goal would be for communities to have already established their priorities when a new opportunity, such as a data center, housing development, or renewable energy project, comes forward.

Helping Different Constituencies Understand the Process

- The toolkit will need to serve multiple audiences.

- The group discussed the importance of showing the steps and processes that take a project from **initial idea through development and approval**, while also explaining where different groups can engage.
- For residents and elected officials, this could include clearer information about how zoning and development decisions are made. Zoning can be particularly frustrating because communities may not think about it until a proposed project directly affects them.
- The toolkit could help **explain both the local decision-making process and the perspective of developers**, including how developers evaluate potential locations and make decisions about where to pursue projects.
- There was also discussion about the importance of equipping elected officials with information about growth and development. Edgecomb's upcoming comprehensive planning process was mentioned as an example of an opportunity to create a "living, breathing" plan that can help communicate the direction a community wants to go.
- Having a **shared framework can help create alignment** among homeowners, residents, elected officials, and developers and give communities something they can return to as development conversations continue.

Existing Tools and Examples: Highlighting NMDC Community Pulse Toolkit

NMDC shared their [Community Pulse Toolkit](#), which was developed with town managers in mind, initially with a focus on Aroostook County.

- The tool includes a community self-assessment and dashboard that brings together demographic and community information. Users can adjust growth assumptions, which then influence the growth analysis output. The tool uses data such as information from the American Community Survey and looks at areas including:
 - Housing supply.
 - Schools.
 - Community growth.
 - Grant matching opportunities.
- The tool generates suggested actions and connects users to funding resources and NMDC assistance.

- One of the strengths of the tool is that it can help communities recognize what they **do not know** about their own communities.
- The group discussed whether the recommendations generated by the tool could be further customized or directed. The underlying concept was seen as useful for helping communities have conversations about what they know, what they need to understand better, and what their priorities should be.
- There was a question about whether the tool should focus on strategies such as adding roads or whether, given Maine's infrastructure realities, it should place more emphasis on infill and making better use of existing infrastructure.
- **Much of the underlying data already exists and that bringing it together in an accessible way is particularly valuable for communities.**

Zoning and Mapping

- GPCOG's work with Portland was discussed as another potential example to inform the toolkit.
- The project mapped zoning at a regional level and identified areas where housing development faces more or fewer restrictions. The analysis used a red/yellow/green approach to illustrate different levels of development opportunity.

A similar approach could potentially be useful for the toolkit by helping communities and developers understand:

- Where development may be easier.
- Where there are greater restrictions.
- Where zoning adjustments could potentially be made.
- Where existing infrastructure and zoning may support growth.

The group discussed showcasing examples like this at future meetings rather than developing a new mapping system if useful resources already exist.

Conservation and Development

- The conservation component of development readiness also needs to be considered.

- The group discussed starting with habitat focus areas and the Landscape Conservation Blueprint to identify locations that may be less appropriate for development.
- There is a particular need for better guidance in places where significant conservation values overlap with potential development areas. IF&W is currently revising its focus-area descriptions, which could provide an opportunity to incorporate updated information.
- The goal would be to help communities understand both **where development may be appropriate and where conservation considerations should play a stronger role.**

Fiscal Impact and Housing Tools

- A New Hampshire fiscal housing calculator was identified as another useful example. It is helpful to contextualize the potential local tax impact of housing development. [Office of Planning & Development - NH Economy](#)
- The tool helps communities understand the potential local tax implications of housing development. A similar approach could potentially help Maine communities think through the fiscal implications of different types of housing development rather than looking only at the number of units or anticipated tax revenue.

Maine State Housing Data

- [The Maine State Housing Data website](#) was identified as a particularly useful existing resource for communities and people interested in housing development.
- Rather than duplicating existing resources, the toolkit could potentially link to and help users navigate resources such as this.

Data Centers and Renewable Energy

- Data centers and renewable energy were discussed as examples of development types that can create significant challenges for communities.
- MMA is tracking local ordinances related to data centers, including moratoria and other ordinances.
- The group noted that data centers in particular can exist in a low-trust environment. Communities may not understand what happens before a project becomes public or which parts of the process are private or proprietary.

- This reinforces the need for communities to understand development processes and establish their own priorities before a proposal arrives.

Supporting Community Volunteers

- The group emphasized that community volunteers need resources that help them feel **comfortable, capable, and confident** engaging with developers and evaluating proposals.
- Planning board members, council members, and select board members may not have technical backgrounds, but they are often responsible for making significant decisions about development.

A toolkit could help them:

- Understand their role.
- Know what questions to ask.
- Identify when additional expertise is needed.
- Understand the development process.
- Keep discussions focused on relevant issues.
- Connect with appropriate technical resources.

Without this support, development review can become broader and more complicated than necessary.

Potential Focus of the Toolkit

The group discussed narrowing the toolkit to the areas where it could have the greatest impact.

A key question going forward is:

If we could help a resource-constrained municipality do only two or three things better, what would make the biggest difference?

Potential areas include:

1. **Understanding the community:** demographics, housing, economic conditions, infrastructure, and existing assets.
2. **Understanding where development is appropriate:** zoning, infrastructure, conservation, and other constraints.
3. **Creating predictable processes:** clear development-review steps, expectations, and timelines.
4. **Accessing expertise:** helping communities know where to go when they do not have the necessary staff or subject-matter expertise.
5. **Preparing decision-makers and residents:** helping volunteers and elected officials engage effectively and helping communities have conversations before development proposals arise.

Institutional Home

- Need to determine where the final toolkit will live and who will maintain it.
- Suggestion that the resource should ultimately live at MOCA, with legislative funding needed to support its development, implementation, and ongoing maintenance.
- This will be important because the toolkit will need to remain current as regulations, funding programs, data, and development trends change.

Next Steps

The group agreed to continue with a **six-meeting process over approximately six months**. Future meetings will be 1.5 hours. Marina will send follow up notes and scheduling poll.

Future meetings will:

- Showcase existing assessments and tools.
- Identify examples of successful approaches in Maine and elsewhere.
- Collect existing toolkits and resources.

- Explore the major components of community readiness.
- Continue discussing the appropriate audience and scope of the toolkit.
- Prepare recommendations for DRAC.

Potential topics for future discussion include:

- Municipal capacity.
- Planning and comprehensive planning.
- Zoning.
- Permitting and development review.
- Data and mapping.
- Infrastructure.
- Conservation.
- Community engagement.
- Fiscal impacts and Municipal Return on Investments.
- Support for planning boards and elected officials.
- Workforce capacity/pipeline for development jobs.

