



Environmental Funders Network

Vision to Action: A Commitment to Maine's Quality of Place
A Collaborative Philanthropic Initiative of the Environmental Funders Network

Letters of Inquiry Synopsis
October 2009

In early 2009, the Environmental Funders Network (EFN) – a project of the Maine Community Foundation and Maine Philanthropy Center – launched a collaborative philanthropic initiative focused on advancing Maine's quality of place. The impetus for the initiative followed publication of a report commissioned by GrowSmart Maine and prepared by the Brookings Institution called *Charting Maine's Future: An Action Plan for Sustainable Prosperity and Quality Places*.

The concept of "quality of place" appealed to EFN's Steering Committee members as a succinct yet encompassing framework for a collaborative philanthropic initiative that respected the autonomy and individual foci of funders while giving each a firm toehold in the proposed initiative. In the months following publication of the "Brookings Report," the initiative evolved to full fruition through ongoing dialogue among members of EFN's Steering Committee and with critical input from stakeholders in Maine's environmental philanthropic and policymaking communities.

Vision to Action: A Commitment to Maine's Quality of Place was publicly launched with a call for Letters of Inquiry (LOIs) in March 2009. In its guidelines to prospective respondents, EFN called for projects and collaborative efforts seeking to strengthen the link between the natural and built environments, engage the public, and, where applicable, build and sustain effective collaborations in order to achieve one or more of the following desired outcomes:

- Broad-based, statewide support for efforts promoting quality of place and the linkages between built and natural environments.
- Regional collaborations achieving greater impact and demonstrating the efficacy of partnerships in supporting and/or promoting built and natural places.
- Knowledge and resource sharing among nonprofit, private, government and philanthropic entities working together to advance quality of place strategies.
- The identification and promotion of best practices in quality of place.
- The identification and mitigation of barriers (including funding gaps) to effective quality of place projects.

EFN indicated that it would award a limited number of grants in varying amounts up to \$100,000, potentially renewable for two additional years. Letters of Inquiry were due four weeks from the date the initiative was

announced. In all, EFN received 97 LOIs. Ultimately, seventeen respondents were invited to submit full proposals and eight were selected for funding.

This report provides a synopsis of *all* LOIs received. As such, it gives readers a “snapshot of a scattershot” of statewide, regional and local projects underway in Maine to advance quality of place. The report begins with basic descriptive information organized around varying dimensions of interest, and concludes with some cautiously made overarching observations and a few questions framed as “food for thought.” The purpose in preparing this synopsis is to learn as much as possible from the first call for proposals about the nature and range of efforts underway in Maine to promote quality of place, and, equally important, to consider how EFN might refine its collaborative philanthropic initiative in the future to better encourage and support innovative, promising, and proven-effective approaches to strengthen quality of place in Maine.

Geographic Distribution

The geographic distribution of projects outlined in the LOIs suggests that efforts to advance Maine’s quality of place are not distinctly rural or urban, southern or northern, interior or coastal. Overall, the projects outlined by the organizations and collaboratives seeking support spanned all 16 counties in Maine in roughly equal proportions. At the upper end, approximately 10 projects were focused in Cumberland and Washington counties; at the lower end, approximately five projects were focused in Kennebec, Lincoln and Piscataquis counties. Many projects crossed county lines because the defining interest was a watershed or transportation corridor, or a broad cultural region or natural landscape such as the North Woods or Maine Coast.

The geographic distribution of projects is not as even when only *regional* efforts are plotted. Relatively more LOIs were received from projects in the coastal counties of York, Cumberland, Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Knox, Waldo, Hancock and Washington, and following the I-95 corridor into Androscoggin and Kennebec counties. Given their population distributions, Oxford and Franklin counties were also well represented in the mix of LOIs received. In contrast, however, the numbers of LOIs received on behalf of regional projects in Aroostook, Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Somerset counties were sparse.

There was no discernable pattern – rural/urban, southern/northern, interior/coastal, or otherwise – in the distribution of funding request *levels*. If the LOIs are in any way representative of the range of ongoing efforts in Maine to promote quality of place (and this assertion cannot be made definitively), then it can be surmised there are large and small projects happening in all regions of the state.

Statewide Projects

Thirty-three LOIs were submitted from organizations seeking support for a statewide or broad regional (North Woods or Maine Coast) project.

In all but two cases, the LOIs were submitted by a single organization rather than by a collaborative with a designated lead partner. However, in at least four cases, the sole organization submitting the LOI was clearly acting on behalf of a network and seeking support to further its efforts as the convener or facilitator of many organizations aligned around a shared vision or purpose.

Projects ranged broadly in foci. Seven focused on the North Woods and five focused broadly on the Maine Coast. In several cases, New England-based land conservation organizations submitted letters to fund ongoing work in Maine. Several national organizations also submitted LOIs.

While many appeared to “stretch” toward a dual focus on the natural and built environment, only five of the LOIs led with a clearly articulated focus on the dynamic interplay between the two. These included:

- A statewide “greening” downtowns effort with emphasis on trail and downtown park development.
- A national organization spreading its work further across Maine by developing regional “Greenprint” maps and, then, engaging broad groups of stakeholders in visioning and land-use planning.
- A statewide advocacy effort to build leadership for change around quality of place principles and to develop a statewide “brown-green” coalition to champion ongoing implementation of the Brookings report.
- An ongoing effort in Maine’s Western Mountains to protect landscape resources, revitalize communities, and create networked economies.
- One organization’s ongoing effort to preserve traditional sporting camps throughout the North Woods and access to the lands on which they are located.

Thirteen of the LOIs sought funds to support ongoing large-scale land conservation or resource protection projects. The types of resource protection projects ranged from one organization operating across New England to protect the Northern Forest, to another organization focused on identifying and implementing incentives for southern and coastal landowners to continue the traditional practice of allowing public access to private lands.

Eight of the LOIs focused broadly on human development, for example, to expand a network of trained volunteers to monitor water quality, serve as island caretakers, or act as consultants to communities interested in developing bicycle-friendly roadways and trails. Finally, four of the LOIs sought funds to conduct policy analyses, and four more focused on promoting asset-based community and economic development broadly.

Regional Projects

Sixty-four LOIs were submitted from local or regional organizations or collaboratives. Proposals ranged broadly in focus, degree of community engagement, and scale. While it is difficult to characterize most of the LOIs solely by one dimension of focus, a few observations can be made.

- Roughly 36 of the LOIs were submitted by a collaborative or on behalf of an association or network of organizations. However, the degree and quality of collaboration is hard to gauge. Only about 12 of the LOIs demonstrated resource sharing in their budgets. On the other hand, roughly 28 LOIs were submitted by organizations that demonstrated little-to-no evidence of collaboration.
- Just under 20 of the LOIs led with a focus on the natural environment. Most were proposals to further resource protection efforts or land conservation (approximately seven LOIs apiece). One focused primarily on policy development and two requested funds to build flower gardens adjacent to buildings.
- Similarly, just under 20 led with a focus on the built environment. Roughly five requested funds to further local trail development; seven to further the preservation of historic buildings; two were focused broadly on downtown revitalization; and, two sought funds for scenic overlook/by-way construction.

- Close to 11 of the LOIs were squarely focused on community and economic development – some to strengthen eco-tourism or cultural tourism, but most to improve the wellbeing of residents broadly.
- Only two led with a clearly articulated focus on the dynamic interplay between the built and natural environments. Interestingly, the organizing dynamic in both of these projects was a watershed – the Androscoggin and Kennebec respectively.
- The remainder was a broad mix: six of the LOIs requested funds to support local strategic and/or comprehensive planning; four requested funds to launch or sustain local agricultural or food delivery systems; a remaining handful focused respectively on education and curriculum development, research, and youth engagement.
- Finally, a sizeable proportion – either directly or indirectly – sought ongoing operational support. Very few new projects were proposed.

Budgets and Funding Requests

Given the range of budget information provided, it's hard to draw precise conclusions about the financial scale and true funding needs of the quality of place projects outlined in the LOIs. As with any call for funding requests, there was wide variation in the quality and thoroughness of responses. However, a number of tentative observations can be made:

- Forty of the LOIs (~41%) contained budgets of under \$100K. Of these, half were in the range of \$20K-\$59K, and just under half were in the range of \$60K-\$99K (several fell below \$20K).
- Forty-nine of the LOIs (~51%) contained budgets in the range of \$100K to \$1M. Thirteen contained budgets of exactly \$100K – the maximum potential award; 30 contained budgets in the range of \$101K-\$500K; and six lay in the range of \$500K to \$1M. Eight LOIs specified a total budget of greater than \$1M. However, it should be noted that many respondents failed to provide thorough overall budget information.
- Roughly 49 of the budgets specified a source (or multiple sources) of matching funds. However, only about 32 showed confirmed or pending sources of external match (private, foundation or government). Otherwise, match was limited to in-kind contributions. Moreover, only 18 of the organizations requesting \$80,000 or more for Year One included matching funds from any source (direct or in-kind).

Overarching Observations

The following observations are made cautiously and with a reminder to readers that they are generalizations about 97 LOIs and not the entire population of efforts in Maine to advance quality of place:

- It is striking that the majority of LOIs described projects or efforts of a long-term nature. Very few LOIs presented new projects for support; most sought support in taking the next steps in a long-term effort. Moreover, very few proposals suggested that their work would be completed with EFN funding. There appears to be great appreciation for the long-term, indeed permanently ongoing, nature of advancing quality of place.

- Relatedly, there was a high proportion of LOIs seeking ongoing operational support. In only a handful was this request made explicitly, but most requested funds to cover ongoing salary and administration costs. The hypothesis of EFN Steering Committee members that many efforts in Maine are undercapitalized and, therefore, failing to reap their full promise, is borne out by the budgets outlined in many of the LOIs received.
- Relative to the total number of LOIs received, very few were submitted by collaboratives with a lead organization and the intent of distributing the grant funds among the partners. Far more commonly, organizational applicants described a range of informal and formal collaborations and networking activity. This was particularly true among the regionally focused LOIs. Unfortunately, the quality and strength of these various collaborations and networks is unknown. Similarly, many of the LOIs outlined plans to engage stakeholders, but not much can be discerned about the quality and level of this engagement.
- There was a plurality of regional efforts to integrate quality of place principles into municipal or regional planning efforts. Each effort was described as one that would result in a new model or best practice. However, there were few mechanisms described for sharing locally developed models, nor was there any corresponding corollary at the state level.
- There is a wide range of operating definitions for quality of place. As one applicant pointed out, “The phrase “quality of place” is an empty vessel. Until we understand specifically what Quality of Place means to communities around the state, we will be unable to make appropriate plans or take effective action to protect it.” Embedded within the LOIs were definitions of quality of place centered on land conservation, resource protection, green space, vibrant downtowns, historic and cultural preservation, social justice, economic wellbeing, food supply, personal empowerment, social capital, and so on.
- The concept of “green and brown” – focusing on the natural and built environments and the dynamic interplay between the two – was not well articulated in most proposals. This observation is tentatively made and results from two observations about the LOIs. First, there was a high number of projects “stretching” to include either a “brown” or “green” focus when their lead organizing principle was the other. Frequently, there was a presumption expressed that a focus on one would inevitably be good for the other. But a concrete integration of the two was not well demonstrated. Second, even though it is a common assertion when seeking funds, many of the LOIs spoke to their intention to create a model or best practice whether it be a plan, ordinance, conservation practice, collaboration, etc. However, in a number of LOIs the model component to the proposal was to include a “green” focus in a “brown” project or vice versa.
- Regardless of how defined, however, quality of place has taken hold as an organizing principle for local, regional and statewide action. Moreover, as evidenced by the LOIs, quality of place does not appear to be distinctly rural or urban, southern or northern, interior or coastal.

Food for Thought

As with any philanthropic effort, there is constructive tension around several dynamics – the quality of applicants, the accountability of grantees, and the question of whether the funder’s intentions are being furthered on the ground – in practice. Having completed its first round of awards – and with implementation only beginning – these are important tensions to hold in balance. However, at this point, it might be useful for Steering Committee members to consider a few questions:

- Did they receive the types of LOIs they expected? What was unexpected? What gives them hope or, inversely, cause for concern?
- To what degree are they satisfied with the range, focus, and quality of LOIs received in the first call? Looking forward, are there certain thresholds they would like to refine or make more explicit?
- Are there particular trends they believe it will be important to track or monitor in future calls for LOIs? What trends do they hope to observe?