

**LIFT360 Leadership Intensive Omega Class
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“Two Maines” project group:

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This report reflects the work of the LIFT360 Leadership Intensive Omega class “Two Maines” project group. We worked on this civic issue from November 2016 to March 2017. The project focused on the following objectives: to learn more about the work of communities; to apply the collaborative and facilitative leadership skills class members learned in the program; and to make a contribution toward issues or opportunities in Maine. Our project team was coached by LIFT360 staff, but the team was primarily led by civic leaders in training, and not by LIFT360 professional staff.

Introduction: Two Maines - From Problem to Opportunity

Maine has a distinctive history and culture, connected to its traditional industrial economy, agricultural base and rural customs. In the latter half of the 20th century, service sector employers and people began moving into southern and coastal Maine. At the same time, Maine’s manufacturing base declined. These factors caused a divergence that has created a perception that Maine is comprised of two states within one, with a shifting line separating one Maine from the other, depending on the factors considered. This perception is supported by data. For example, employment growth from 2010 to 2015 was 3% in Portland. As one moves north and east, employment opportunities decrease, and employment growth during this same period fell to 2.3% in the mid-coast region, around 1% in the Androscoggin and Kennebec regions, -1.7% Downeast, and -4.5% in Aroostook County. The Greater Portland metropolitan area has characteristics more akin to urban southern New England than to rural northern Maine.

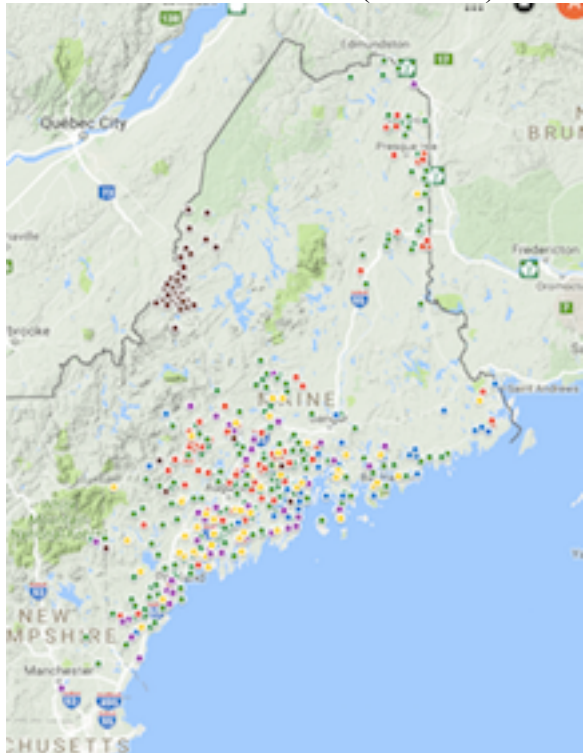
Rural Maine offers some of the most pristine beauty in the state, but has fewer economic opportunities and less diversity in population than its more populous urban southern counterpart. The factors contributing to this phenomenon of ‘two states within one’ include differences in demographic characteristics, economic influences, social perspectives, and political leanings. Research indicates the overall differences between the “Two Maines” are as follows:

- Politically Liberal South/Coast <-> Politically Conservative North/East
- More Diverse South/Coast <-> Less Diverse North/East
- More Affluent South/Coast <-> Less Affluent North/East
- Greater economic growth South/Coast <-> Low or negative economic growth North/East

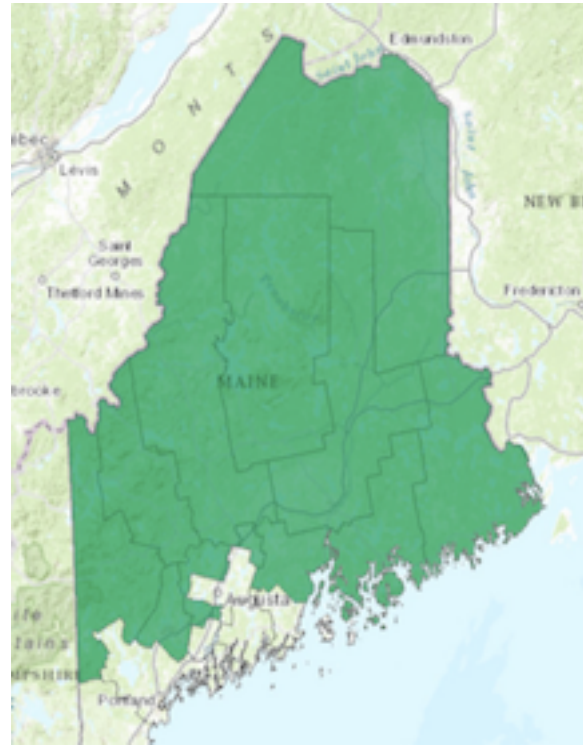
Although there is no single agreed-upon dividing line between the “Two Maines,” an approximate line follows Maine’s two congressional districts, with District 1 aligning closer to the ‘southern Maine’ and District 2 aligning closer to the ‘northern Maine.’

The purpose of the “Two Maines” research project is to identify a key issue that helps unite southern and northern Maine while representing the totality of the state, in its diverse experiences and realities. From a unifying perspective, agriculture spans and serves as a bridge to the concept and perception of “Two Maines.”

Geographically, farms are widely dispersed throughout Maine, as Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) data shows.



Maine's organic farms



Maine's Congressional Districts

With new farm growth in Maine in recent years averaging 40%, Maine has a higher proportion of young farmers than any other state in the nation. During the same period, national growth remained almost flat, near 1% on average. As a result, farming and agricultural support in the state spans regional, economic, political, and social divisions.

Northern and eastern Maine offer an abundance of farmland at affordable prices, compared to southern Maine. Farmers relocating to Maine because of the pull of agriculture, many of them new farmers, see Maine as one unified place in which to make a farming and agricultural model for the future. Broad-based civic, private and non-government organization (NGO) support for farming provides multiple resources, tools, education and financing options to make farming in Maine practical and to promote profitability. The opportunities for agriculture as an economic driver and unifier for Maine are numerous.

The 2016 Locavore Index, which studies local food production and consumption, ranks Maine second nationally, behind Vermont, in commitment to local, healthy food. This speaks volumes about the opportunity for advancement of cultural and economic unity through Maine's agricultural economy. Many Mainers will pay more for local food and consider it a source of pride for the state. Focus on local products has helped Maine become known for its cuisine on a global scale.

Inadequate infrastructure and challenges related to supply, demand, and costs limit the full potential of agriculture in Maine and make it difficult for farmers to prosper. Farming is both a labor and capital-intensive pursuit and, as such, both time and money come at a premium for many farmers. Transportation time and costs, for moving farm products to market, continues to be prohibitive to many farmers, impairing their ability to access wholesale and retail markets. Farmers struggle to sell all of their available produce, leaving “dollars on the table” and allowing quality agricultural products to go to waste. Further, due to the lack of a network linking farmers and market opportunities, farmers struggle to produce the right mix of products to meet demand and keep their local farms running profitably. Finally, farmers, especially in the most rural and isolated areas of the state, lack access to markets and technologies to support the success of their businesses.

Project Mission

The mission of the Lift360 Two Maines research group is to create common ground between the “Two Maines” by finding root issues that can improve the economics for agriculture in Maine and increase the distribution of Maine-sourced food to Mainers and markets beyond.

As a project team, we have identified four key priorities that would vitalize the flow of agricultural commerce throughout the state of Maine:

- Statewide broadband access
- Additional food hubs and aggregators
- Improved transportation systems
- Financial support systems to promote agricultural development

Encouraging Trends

Maine farmers have a variety of resources to assist them. MOFGA, Maine Farmland Trust, and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension provide farmers with a range of tools and services, such as:

- Land conservation programs
- Apprenticeship programs
- Agricultural research, education and professional development
- Degree programs and certifications
- Support and networking

New and innovative approaches to marketing value-added agricultural products enable farmers to realize a higher profit margin. Some examples of this include:

- Local Farmers’ Markets and Community Supported Agriculture programs
- Food hubs that streamline transportation and logistics
- Specialized crops to support emerging trends, like food preferences of new Mainers

- Food processors and aggregators that enhance the value of agricultural products by consolidating food from a variety of producers to meet wholesale and institutional demand

The demand for local food spans all demographic and socioeconomic sectors of our society:

- Consumers will go out of their way, and spend more, to have a personal connection with their food
- Maine Harvest Bucks increase SNAP benefits, giving more Mainers access to healthy local food
- Appreciation for local food influences restaurant choice by consumers and causes these establishments to increase use of local food
- Nationally, “local food” sales are expected to reach \$20B by 2019, a 66% rise

Maine businesses, government entities, and NGOs prioritize supporting agriculture within our state:

- Grocery retailers create partnerships and programs to promote agriculture in Maine
- Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry and the USDA offer education, product promotion, grants, and rural development programs to assist Maine’s farmers
- Slow Money Maine, Maine Farm Bureau, Coastal Enterprises, Inc., Envision Maine, and other NGOs provide technical and financial resources to support farmers and rural economies in Maine
- Good Shepherd Food Bank’s Mainers Feeding Mainers program buys fresh and nutritional Maine food and distributes it to Maine families in need. Since 2010, they have distributed more than four million pounds of fresh Maine-grown food, from over 50 farm partners, to families in need

Opportunities to cultivate agriculture and create common ground between the Two Maines

- Maine imports a greater percentage of its food than any other state in the continental US. This stems from easier access to and lower costs for food from large-scale agriculture business in other states, but in the long run, it impairs Maine’s agriculture and rural economy.
- Maine consumers cannot always afford local food or may not have access to farmers’ markets, CSAs, or retail stores that feature locally produced food.
- Some of the factors that drive up the cost of locally produced food stem from lack of scale and related efficiencies.
- Wholesalers and retailers have difficulty purchasing produce from multiple smaller farmers; they prefer to order and receive product from fewer suppliers that can fulfill a broad range of orders.
- Northern Maine lacks food hubs and other processing facilities that create market opportunities (through processing or aggregating product from many farms to fulfill large orders) and reduce processing and transportation costs.

- Farmers find both distance and cost of transporting product to existing food hubs and processing facilities challenging.
- Required safety regulations impact both growing and processing; compliance increases time and equipment costs.
- Farmers identify innovative and lucrative opportunities, but the infrastructure and resources needed to pursue innovation are costly or unavailable.
- Maine’s telecommunications infrastructure is among the worst in the US. Without high-speed broadband Internet connections, Maine farmers cannot access the research and technology needed to make their businesses successful, lack the full ability to effectively plan production relative to market need, and have limited ability to engage in direct sales and digital marketing.

How key priorities benefit farmers and unify Maine

1. Statewide high-speed broadband access opens up many opportunities for farmers and rural communities.

Learning

- Discover resources already available to support the viability of Maine farms
- Gain access to educational programs from UMaine, MOFGA, and other agriculture information providers about farming optimization
- Streamline certification for farmers, including GAP and organic processes
- Research and find ways to reduce costs
- Find methods for creating value-added agricultural commodities from local products
- Connect rural children and adults to educational, cultural, health care, employment, and entertainment opportunities that Maine’s urban residents currently enjoy

Collaboration and shared services

- Buy, sell, and barter equipment and supplies from one another
- Pool resources and share cost of supplies with other farmers
- Build transportation efficiencies by collaborating on delivery schedules and product pick up opportunities

Marketing

- Brand and market agricultural businesses online to connect with retail and wholesale customers in Maine and beyond
- Outreach and solicit consumers about what products are desired
- Publicize gleaning opportunities to prevent food waste

2. Food hubs and aggregators expand markets for farmers and meet demand for healthy, local food.

- Fulfill contracts for major institutional purchasers like hospitals and

universities by aggregating product from multiple farms to meet quantity requirements

- Extend season for food distribution by freezing and other processing techniques
 - Save operations expenses by sharing equipment and other resources
 - Maximize product distribution, including ability to process second quality produce into value-added products
 - Create new markets that allow farmers to diversify crops, leading to greater sustainability
3. Improved transportation systems reduce transit time and cost.
- Create transportation hubs that connect farmers to each other and to distribution routes
 - Provide opportunities for farms to collaborate with one another online to reduce transportation costs
 - Position farmers to take advantage of future technologies like electric and self-driving vehicles, which could reduce transportation costs significantly
4. Financial support systems to promote agricultural development in Maine will ease pressures on farmers and other aspects of the agriculture supply chain and open up opportunities.
- Create incentives for state and local government entities, including schools and universities, as well as private businesses, to use Maine agricultural products
 - Enact tax incentives that support acquisition and use of Maine farmland, help farmers get started, and promote year-round greenhouse farming
 - Develop a network that pools the expertise and resources of the many non-profits currently working on improving the economic landscape for Maine's agricultural economy
 - Leverage the work already done by key players throughout the state, focused on rural economic development, high-quality broadband access, agriculture and the food system in Maine as a whole, to increase the distribution of Maine sourced food to Mainers and markets beyond

Individual Actions

As the “Two Maines” research group explored Maine’s agricultural economy and the importance of local food to the health, culture and vitality of our state, we were inspired by the potential for local food production to unite Maine. Northern and eastern Maine have abundant farmland and the natural resources necessary for local food production. Southern Maine has a thriving market for healthy, local food. Each of these two Maines “brings something to the table” in promoting a sense of economic and cultural unity. Although the project has come to an end, we want to sustain the excitement and energy we gained through our research, and share it with our Lift360 classmates, friends, families and colleagues.

We have identified these individual actions as meaningful steps we can continue to take toward “One Maine.” We hope they inspire you as well.

Russell Libby, one of the nation’s leading advocates for organic farming, espoused a “Ten Dollars a Week” concept: the idea that communities could thrive if every household spent that \$10 per week on locally produced food. Embrace this idea, and pass it on to your family, friends, and neighbors.

Write to your state representative and senator in support of LD 421, HP 301, a bill to increase funding to the ConnectME Authority from \$1,000,000 to \$5,000,000 to expand universal broadband and high-speed Internet into unserved rural areas. Track the progress of this bill here, and continue to advocate for it.
http://legislature.maine.gov/bills/default_ps.asp?snum=126&PID=1456

Support organizations doing great work on behalf of Maine’s agricultural economy by donating or volunteering.

- Good Shepherd Food Bank, Mainers Feeding Mainers buys local food from Maine farmers and provides it to Mainers facing hunger.
<https://www.gsfb.org>
- Maine Broadband Coalition provides information to help public policymakers and Maine citizens make the best choices about building a robust and productive information technology infrastructure.
<https://mainebroadbandcoalition.org>
- Maine Farmland Trust purchases conservation easements that keep farms from being developed, and in return give farmers capital to reinvest.
<https://www.maineFarmlandtrust.org>
- Maine Harvest Bucks increases the value of SNAP benefits spent at participating farmers markets. <http://www.maineHarvestbucks.org>
- Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association educates on and advocates for organic agriculture, a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. <http://www.mofga.org>
- Slow Money Maine is a diverse network of individuals, philanthropists, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government entities focused on investing in farms and fisheries, and the ecosystems that sustain them, as a means of growing our local food systems, economies, and communities statewide. <http://www.slowmoneymaine.org>

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