



Piscataquis County Tourism Innovation Program (TIP)

Overview

The Northern Forest Center and partners are offering financial support to help tourism providers in the Moosehead Lake and Katahdin Iron Works regions develop and implement innovations to improve their business performance.

This new program is grounded by a set of quality standards developed by the Center and other industry leaders through Maine Woods Discovery – a cooperative marketing initiative working to position the Maine Woods region as a top quality travel destination. Those standards, or best practices, include:

- Provide authentic outdoor and cultural experiences in the Maine Woods region, with activities supported by highly qualified guides, instructors and interpreters.
- Deliver excellent service in every aspect of the visitor's experience.
- Provide well-maintained facilities and equipment that are clearly described in promotional materials and meet highest industry standards.
- Commit to environmentally responsible operations, conservation of the forest landscape, and respect for private forest landowners.
- Support local communities.
- Commit to meet or exceed applicable industry safety standards.

The Tourism Innovation Program will provide up to 50% of the cost to enable qualified businesses to engage top consultants and contractors to implement innovations that improve bottom line performance, expand job opportunities, and enhance the region's destination appeal.

The Center is working locally with the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), Moosehead Lake Region Economic Development Corporation and Piscataquis County Economic Development Council as project partners to implement this new program which is expected to support approximately 15 businesses over five years with assistance generally ranging between \$5,000 and \$25,000.

Who can apply?

During the initial phase of the project, financial assistance is available for lodging businesses, guide services and outfitters who help visitors enjoy the Maine Woods. Participating businesses must have been in operation for at least three years, and have paid employees in addition to the proprietors. As the project evolves, eligibility may be expanded to other types of tourism businesses such as restaurants and retailers.

Geographic service area

Preference will be given to businesses located in towns near Moosehead Lake and the gateways to the Katahdin Iron Works area. Specific target communities include: Beaver Cove, Greenville, Rockwood, Shirley, Monson, Abbot, Bowerbank, Willimantic, Sebec, Milo, and Brownville. Businesses in unorganized territories will be given similar preference if located close to the AMC lands.

Funding source

Project funding is made possible through federal New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) financing of the Appalachian Mountain Club's (AMC) investment in its Maine Woods Initiative – including reconstruction of Medawisla Lodge on Second Roach Pond, expanded trail networks, trout habitat restoration, and other projects. The Center facilitated the NMTC financing, working with the Massachusetts Housing Investment

Corporation (MHIC) and JP Morgan Chase, institutions that provided critical capital and tax credit authority in support of the NMTC financing.

How can financial support be used?

Financial support provided through the Tourism Innovation Program must be used to engage external consultants to work with a business owner to develop innovative strategies to take the business to the next level. Support also can be used to help cover direct costs of implementing related business improvements.

The Center and its partners are open to creative initiatives with the potential for transformative impact, with the following examples representing critical and timely opportunities for strategic investment:

- 1) Market Development, Online Presence, Customer Management Upgrades & Related Training.
- 2) Packaging, Itineraries & New Product Development to Reach Growing Markets.
- 3) Facility Upgrades to Enhance Efficiency and Visitor Experience.

Project development process

Financial support will be based on a rigorous project development process intended to ensure that business objectives and expected outcomes are strategic and clear to all parties and that the participating business has the financial and management capacity needed for successful innovation. While it will vary based on the nature of the initiative, the general project development process will include the following steps.

- 1) Concept Development and Pre-Screening – business owner contacts Center or local partner to discuss idea, if appropriate submits project overview – including summary of business and financial status.
- 2) Project Development – business owner works with Center staff to develop detailed project concept.
- 3) Advisory Committee Input – local program partners, MHIC, and other experts as appropriate, review concept to assess alignment with program goal and provide suggestions for improvement or refinement.
- 4) Final Project Development and Refinement – business owner works with Center, and consultants as appropriate, to finalize project proposal.
- 5) Final Review – Center and MHIC review and make final determination about financial support.

Review Criteria

Project funding decisions will be based on multiple factors with primary emphasis on the readiness of the business to implement a significant improvement, and the potential for that change to result in improved business performance and quality job creation. Other factors to be considered include:

- Business strength and standing – existing products and services are being provided and business revenues are consistent; the business participates in business associations or other networks.
- Commitment to Innovation – demonstrated commitment by the business owner to learning and innovation demonstrated by past participation in training and previous business improvements.
- Project Scope – because larger investments are likely to result in more significant positive results, emphasis and preference will be placed on businesses committed to larger investments.
- Job Impacts – preference will be given to businesses with demonstrated potential to add quality jobs and/or stabilize and upgrade existing jobs.
- Connection to Natural Resources – preference will be given to businesses whose services are closely linked to the region's forests, lakes and rivers – including guide services, sporting camps and lodges.

**To learn more about the Tourism Innovation Program, contact:
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