

# Build Maine conference offers practical ideas that really work

*Coming in June, the sixth annual event offers hands-on advice that has left some past attendees wondering why they hadn't thought of the improvements before.*

By Stephanie Bouchard

No matter what their size, cities and towns across the state grapple with how to nurture vital economic development, meet the livability needs and desires of residents and do both of those things in a financially manageable and sustainable fashion. For six years, Build Maine has endeavored to address these challenges by fomenting innovation in community planning.

What is Build Maine? "It's a state of mind – just kidding!" joked cofounder Kara Wilbur, a Portland-based planner and urban designer. She's only sort of kidding, though, she acknowledged.

On paper, Build Maine exists to host and organize an annual conference that brings together nationally and internationally recognized experts in urban planning and design, transportation, economic development, housing – in any area relates to planning, building, maintaining and designing cities and towns – to talk about how to plan, build, maintain and design communities using common sense and in economically sensible ways.

In a more existential sense, Build Maine is an incubator and instigator of ideas, enthusiasm and community building – community building not in terms of actual buildings and streets and sewer and water lines, but rather in people-to-people connection.

"We're in the hands of people who are doing amazing things around the country and they talk with us and share with us these things that are working in other places like Maine. We can go back home having a common frame of reference about what's



possible and that helps these sometimes difficult conversations about zoning and municipal investment go a little bit more smoothly," said Nate Rudy, Hallowell's city manager. Hallowell is a city sponsor of Build Maine.

Being able to have those conversations is crucial, Rudy said. Municipalities must be able to talk honestly and openly with all the stakeholders involved in community building in order to weave together new development with what is great about the places where we live in such a way that municipalities can afford to sustain both without raising property taxes to unaffordable levels.

Presenting effective, low-cost solutions so that municipalities and builders of communities can achieve those dual goals is one of the missions of Build Maine.

"Honestly, every year I've gone, I've walked away with a couple of just amazing, like, oh-my-God-that's-great (ideas)," said Ben Frey, a selectman from Newcastle who also is the vice-chair of his town's board of assessors.

Frey has attended all the Build

Maine conferences (this year's, in June, will be the sixth). He, and others from Newcastle, have been able to use some of the ideas they learned about at the conferences.

## Comp plan assistance

For instance, as the planning committee was getting started on the town's new comprehensive plan a few years ago, everyone on the committee attended the conference and left excited and energized. It set the tone for the comp plan process, and the new comp plan (it was passed last summer) incorporates some of ethos and ideas they learned about at Build Maine, he said.

One of the ideas Newcastle has already put into practice is called tactical urbanism. Tactical urbanism is a sort of DIY practice that lets communities test out potential improvements without spending huge amounts of money.

Newcastle has used tactical urbanism to test out potential changes to two problem traffic areas: by the fish ladder and local swimming hole on Route 215 that marks the town line between Newcastle and Nobleboro; and, at the intersection of Main Street, Route 215 and Academy Hill that confounds tourists in the summer and is a year-round hazard to pedestrians.

In both cases, Newcastle temporarily changed the traffic patterns of these areas to see if the changes they were testing would work. They used what they had on hand to do the testing. In the case of the intersection, they closed off the slip lane and put staffers on the road to direct traffic in the new pattern, and by the swimming hole, Frey and the town's road commissioner set up some plastic bollards to create a temporary sidewalk to sepa-

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rate pedestrians and passing vehicles and to slow down traffic.

The intersection pilot ran for a handful of hours and the swimming hole pilot ran for about a week. The town got amazing feedback from residents (some of it heated!), said Frey, and got to see what the proposed changes would be like without dropping a ton of (or no) money. While no permanent road changes have been made yet, the pilots led to more conversation about what can be done, should be done and how to do it and afford it.

### Topsham traffic changes

The Town of Topsham, which also is a municipal sponsor of Build Maine, has done similar things to address issues there, said John Shattuck, the town's economic and community development director. Topsham has worked with various professionals he met at Build Maine conferences, including Tom Errico, a Falmouth-based traffic engineer with TY Ling International Group, an infrastructure consulting firm, who has helped on a number of traffic congestion solutions. For example, with traffic snarls at a section on Main Street where there was a left turn on the northbound approach to a hill.

Similar to the tactics Newcastle used, Topsham made temporary, low-cost adjustments to model how the traffic flow would change if left turns were only allowed at the traffic light at the top of the hill. The town gathered feedback from drivers, residents and business owners in the area. The town got its fill of irate responses, but ultimately, 2:1 were in favor of the changes, Shattuck said.

By doing that monthlong test, Topsham was able to document that traffic backups were substantially mitigated when left turns were restricted to a traffic light up a hill and eliminated as an option on the hill's northbound approach. The town eventually made the temporary change permanent, Shattuck said, and traffic flow is much better along that heavily-traveled section of the town's roadways.

Topsham's efforts may lack the glamour (to a planning nerd like Shattuck, anyway) of a "brand new, shiny roundabout," he noted, but they have had "demonstrable, real positive effects."

## BUILD MAINE CONFERENCE 2019

**Celebrating its sixth year**, the Build Maine conference takes place in Lewiston on Wednesday, June 5 and Thursday, June 6. The Maine Municipal Association is a promotional partner of the two-day event. The main conference featuring keynote speakers takes place on June 6. Hands-on workshops take place on June 5, as does the beer garden networking event in the evening. Continuing education credits are available.

Tickets for individual attendees are \$130 for both days; \$83 for the main conference program on Thursday, June 6; \$53 for the workshop day on Wednesday, June 5.

Municipal sponsorships of \$515 (for towns) and \$1,030 (for cities) entitle sponsoring municipalities to unlimited tickets for municipal employees, select board/council members, and planning board/commission members as well as acknowledgements in the conference's promotional materials.

For information and registration, go to [www.build-maine.com](http://www.build-maine.com).

### Practical approach


In Maine, where flashiness often doesn't count for much, the ordinariness of some of the ideas presented at Build Maine is part of their appeal.

Some of the ideas Frey, of Newcastle, has gotten from presenters have been so obvious as to be "ridiculous," he said. "Sometimes it takes going to a conference like Build Maine for the very obvious thing to be stated in such a way that it can be heard," he said.

Which takes us back to Kara Wilbur's half-joke that Build Maine is a state of mind. By grounding people in the educational and experimental

environment of the conference and giving people a safe place to talk about thorny community issues, they gain the headspace that allows them return to their communities with renewed energy.

"It's exciting to be exposed to new ideas and see how they can be applied to your town," Frey said, even if those new ideas may not be able to be implemented right away or may not work in your community. "For me as a municipal officer, it's one of the great ways of getting refreshed into thinking there are ways that we can do things better." ■



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