



**The Brookings Institution
Reimagine Rural podcast**

**“Skowhegan, Maine, is making waves as it builds a vibrant future
along the Kennebec River”**

November 12, 2025

Guests:

- KRISTINA CANNON, CEO and President, Main Street Skowhegan
- GARVAN DONEGAN, President and CEO, Central Maine Growth Council
- SAM HIGHT, Dealer Principal, Hight Family of Dealerships, Skowhegan
- AMBER LAMBKE, Co-founder and CEO, Maine Grains
- PATRIC MOORE, Director of Entrepreneurship, Main Street Skowhegan

Host:

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Episode Summary:

A former mill town once defined by economic decline, Skowhegan, Maine, is thriving again through creativity and collaboration. From a growing regional food hub and a major riverfront revitalization effort to new housing and early education projects, residents are proving that rural communities can innovate, adapt, and build a vibrant future rooted in heritage and shared vision.

[sound of a flowing river]

PIPA: The Kennebec River: One of most important natural resources for New England inhabitants going back thousands of years. That sound you're hearing is the river flowing near the dam in Skowhegan, a town of around 8,600 in west central Maine, about halfway between Boston and Quebec City.

The Kennebec helped explorers chart new paths, served as a thoroughfare for trading, and provided sustenance for the Indigenous communities that first named it. And as Skowhegan grew, the river remained a key source of the town's growth.

[0:42]

CANNON: We had a couple dozen mills perched on the edge of the river back in our heyday. The train came through across the the river as well and sent people to Lakewood Theater. So people from New York would come up to vacation.

PIPA: Like countless small places across the country, Skowhegan experienced an economic downturn starting in the 1980s. But it's found renewal by getting back to its roots. And in this episode of *Reimagine Rural*, I'll learn how town leaders began to transform this place by investing in the Kennebec River and its surroundings as a source for outdoor recreation — *and* by restoring the agricultural economy in an area once referred to as New England's breadbasket.

[music]

I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution, and your host for the podcast where I talk to local people and bring you dispatches from towns across rural America where neighbors are working together to solve problems in their local communities and are helping hope take hold.

[1:48]

HIGHT: Growing up in Skowhegan, we were always under the mindset that this was a failing mill town where all the woolen and industrial mills left in the '50s and '60s. And we continued to operate out of the shadows of that.

PIPA: That's Sam Hight, dealer principal at the Hight Family of Dealerships in Skowhegan.

HIGHT: We're on the intersection of Routes 201 and Route 2, with a very high traffic count, probably now is around 25,000 cars going over the bridge every day. But going across that bridge, it was shuttered mill next to shuttered mill going through a downtown that had a lot of empty storefronts. So that was sort of the vision of what downtown was, it was kind of a pass through.

[2:32]

CANNON: Downtown was looking a little rundown as most, you know, economically depressed rural communities are.

PIPA: Kristina Cannon is CEO and president of Main Street Skowhegan. At the top of the episode, you heard her describing the mills that once lined the river. In 2005, when her organization started, a lot of storefronts were empty.

CANNON: There were some thriving businesses. And Main Street got underway thanks to a group of local leaders with this recognition that Skowhegan has such

[music]

great opportunity and we have such great assets and great local leadership, and we need to put that all together and figure out what Skowhegan's future looks like.

PIPA: Twenty years later, Kristina calls her nonprofit the town's "economic engine" — supporting and growing local businesses and attracting visitors and residents. But in those early years, with no employees, it was *volunteers* who heeded the call. As Amber Lambke tells it, the stakes were high.

[3:36]

LAMBKE: I was willing to get involved at that time because it was clear that this was a community that was either going to make it or it wasn't.

PIPA: Amber was a new mom interested in helping Skowhegan be the place where she and her husband would settle down.

LAMBKE: We were young. We had just gotten married in 2001. I went to my first town meeting and was listening to the fire department that was under threat because of an insufficient tax base to support essential services.

We were watching other people our age move here for a short period and then turn around and decide to leave because they couldn't see themselves raising a family here. And yet we were also interviewing people who had made a life here successfully whose children were quite successful and felt like they had a successful education and growing up in Skowhegan, who felt quite confident about this area.

PIPA: Amber looked to a longtime hotel owner as an example of someone who had settled down in Skowhegan but also enjoyed a rich life traveling the world doing economic development and consulting work.

[4:41]

LAMBKE: And I asked him with limited time and resources where's the best place for me to plug in to be helpful? And he said, pick something you care about and dive in. There is so much to be done.

[music]

PIPA: She seriously considered the question. And the answer? Food.

LAMBKE: I love to cook at home. I love to garden. It's something I care a lot about. And whether it's a small market or a large market, my husband and I were going to be committed to supporting the farmers in the area anyway.

At that time, the farmer's market was small, and it had a limited set of offerings, and yet we knew that the local food environment was growing. There was a lot of interest in local food.

And there were some conflicts to address in really trying to understand why isn't there a market for more local food? How do we say yes to the young farmers that want to move back to this area and make a living farming? That would take growing the audience for local food.

PIPA: At the time, Amber was working as a speech language pathologist. And she was often the mediator in tense situations between schools and families. It was a skill she applied to her volunteer work at the farmer's market.

[5:54]

LAMBKE: I was very comfortable walking into teams in conflict and just listening and trying to peel back the layers of the onion and figure out what's going on here and what are the root causes of some of the problems.

And so when the farmer's market opportunity to volunteer presented itself, and I learned that business owners in Skowhegan were calling the cops on the market when they tried to host live music, and the town was getting hate mail from the parents of young farmers moving back to this area who couldn't get into the farmer's market, I just said, okay, well let's figure this out.

PIPA: Then, as the farmer's market grew, a new obstacle emerged.

[6:33]

LAMBKE: As the efforts in Skowhegan took off, we quite accidentally, I would say, stumbled into the fact that grains in Maine were a sticky point. We have rules in Maine that you have to grow or produce whatever you bring to a farmer's market. But bakers, who are essential to farmers' markets in bringing people in every week, were exempted from all those rules because it was perceived that we don't have any grains in Maine.

And so bakers were starting to ask, why can't I get grains from the region? I know that farmer grows grains as a cover crop, you know, winter rye, buckwheat, oats. These things were being grown in Maine, but they weren't being consumed.

PIPA: Amber would go on to solve that problem in a *big* way, a way that probably even she couldn't have predicted. In 2012 she would establish a milling business, Maine Grains,

that would become not only a major downtown anchor but would gain national recognition.

[music]

More on that evolution later.

A couple of years after Amber started her business, Kristina Cannon and Main Street Skowhegan began asking people what they wanted to see for the town's future, to develop a strategic plan.

[7:55]

CANNON: Our natural resource economy, a focus on what had been in the works for many years around our river development — that was a major focus for the community during that strategic planning initiative. But also the agricultural movement rose really to the top of the, top of the list as well.

And of course, people wanted more jobs, and they wanted more business development and investment, and they wanted to see people thrive here and the quality of life improve.

And so when we got the results of the strategic plan, we saw where people wanted to see this town go, we really took initiative and said, okay, we're going to do those things.

PIPA: They also worked to get buy-in from the community — and especially the old guard — by applying to host the 2018 Moose Lottery. Yeah, you heard right — the *moose* lottery. It's a yearly drawing in which the state of Maine's Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife chooses randomly who gets to receive a coveted moose hunting permit.

[8:57]

CANNON: It's kind of a silly thing, but it was important in building trust in multiple different areas of the community.

So in Skowhegan, my motto is generally go big or go home. So instead of just hosting this event for people to hear their names called, we decided we needed to host a multi-day festival around it. So we put together a committee and we hosted it at the fairgrounds. And we were thrilled to welcome about 6,000 people to town.

Not everyone, of course, was in the lottery, but people came out because it was something, it really digs into Maine's heritage, this hunting heritage. We had outdoor rec and other traditional Maine sports represented during that event. And it was a just a great opportunity for people to come out in June to celebrate Maine's hunting and recreation heritage.

And that amount of economic impact from 6,000 people being in town was certainly not unnoticed.

PIPA: And not only that, attendees at Skowhegan's festival also earned a Guinness World Record: for the most people simultaneously making a moose call.

[audio of crowd making moose call]

PIPA: Kristina grew up about 20 minutes north of town. She returned to Maine from Boston after the 2008 recession — and Sam Hight set about getting his old friend involved in the future of Skowhegan.

[10:28]

CANNON: Sam Hight, who we've been long-time friends, said we're looking for to hire an executive director at this organization that is doing good work in Skowhegan, and I think you'd be a good fit for it, and you should apply, which I did.

I think that a lot of rural citizens understand that sometimes status quo is what you get in a rural community, right? And so we are seeing in rural Skowhegan and rural Maine, I think, this drop in volunteerism and civic engagement. And I would say I was probably part of that problem back when I moved home in 2009.

It really didn't dawn on me until I started looking at this position and this work that was happening in Skowhegan that I should be getting more involved in my rural community.

PIPA: Sam himself was all too familiar with the rat race in Boston: He had been working hundred-hour weeks at an investment bank there when he was called back to run the family car dealership in Skowhegan. The Hight Auto Group is an institution here — Sam's great-grandfather Walter Hight bought a Ford Agency here over a century ago.

[11:31]

HIGHT: We've operated a business in downtown Skowhegan since 1911 where the railroad car used to come and drop the Model T's off and we'd build them and sell them. And, you know, you'd have to wait till after mud season was over to deliver these things. So we had all winter to build them.

I had no family pressure coming back to the dealerships. I knew it was going to happen eventually. My grandfather, who was second generation — Kirb — he pitched it pretty hard for me to move home. As he said, you wouldn't be able to raise chickens in Boston, Sam.

Once I moved home, I started thinking, why would someone move to this area? If I hadn't had a multi-generational family business with some growth opportunity, there'd probably be no reason for me to move home. A lot of my friends from high school did not move home and and certainly none of the Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin folks usually stick around.

PIPA: That was in 2008. And it wasn't long before Sam, too, got involved with the Main Street program.

[12:37]

HIGHT: So I wanted to become involved thinking, one, I'm here, I'm stuck. I got the family business. So how do you make this place a better place? You know, we want to produce a community that's a best place to live, work, and play. So how do we do that? Do you focus on, first, making it a good place to live and play and then you get

the jobs here? Or do you have to get the jobs here and then you work on the play and the live. And I think it's a balance between both of those things.

Selfishly, obviously, I want the community to grow and have more jobs and have people be paid more because I'm going to sell more trucks and I'm going to sell more cars. So, I mean, there is, I am a human being, so there are selfish qualities there. But I was certainly put in a position in life where I am able to, and the family is able to, give back to the community.

PIPA: For rural economic development to really take shape here, Sam realized Skowhegan and the surrounding area would need affordable housing. In a town just north of here, he and a small team of developers built 18 affordable rental housing units using subsidies from the Maine's Rural Affordable Rental Housing Program, with another 18 to come.

As if he doesn't have enough on his plate, Sam is also involved in bringing quality childcare and preschool to 160 children in Skowhegan. He chaired a fundraising committee, with a goal to locally raise \$3 million to offset the \$4.4 million bond for the construction of a preschool wing onto an existing elementary school. Members of the state's congressional delegation — including both U.S. Senators King and Collins — set aside almost \$2 million in Congressionally Directed Spending for the project.

[14:21]

HIGHT: We raised \$5.5 million. So we're not only able to build this first of its kind school, but there was no implication on local taxpayers. The bond was completely paid. And on top of that, money left over for operations. So we got affordable housing. Check. We've got early childhood education. Check.

[music]

And now we're just trying to figure out jobs and getting people to move here.

PIPA: Skowhegan is home to at least one company you've definitely heard of: New Balance, which *a/so* happens to be the brand I've been wearing for about three decades now. The Boston-based company has five manufacturing facilities across New England. And just before my trip, it unveiled a \$65 million, 120,000 square foot addition to the factory in Skowhegan. The company employs about 400 people in Central Maine.

There's also Sappi, the South African paper company that employs about 800 people at its mill in Skowhegan. This year the company announced a \$500 million expansion of its own.

[15:38]

CANNON: The half billion dollars that they just invested in their facility in Skowhegan and the 40% of the tax base that they represent has certainly allowed us to, I think, think about what Skowhegan's future looks like and be a little bit more thoughtful about that. Because we're not in dire straits right now in Skowhegan. We are a poverty-stricken community for sure. We're a service center for the county.

I think that having Sappi and New Balance as anchor businesses in the community has really given us a little bit of a leg up and frankly over other rural communities that really have felt the impact of being a mill town and then losing all of their mills.

PIPA: Main Street Skowhegan has created an outdoors basecamp in downtown. It has a gear lending library, outdoor clinics, skill workshops, bike repair, and other things. Kristina has focused a *lot* of Main Street's future development efforts around the river, building on the vision that developed out of the strategic plan.

[16:34]

CANNON: We have a beautiful river running right through the downtown, but it's really inaccessible because we have a steep rocky gorge. And so we'll be adding access points on both sides of the river.

Then we're also going to be constructing in the river a whitewater wave shaper. So basically we'll be enhancing the whitewater that's currently present in the river to create a park and play destination like you would see in Salida, Colorado, in Bend, Oregon, in Boise, Idaho. Basically, we will be creating the opportunity for people to kayak and surf right in our downtown river gorge on a standing wave feature.

PIPA: That feature will be the first of its kind in Maine.

[music]

And there are even potentially more changes for the river — The Nature Conservancy just bought four dams with aspirations of removing them and getting the salmon to run back.

Main Street's also planning a boardwalk to connect the river to the commercial district and an expanded trail system. In 2022, this River Park project was awarded a nearly \$5 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, or EDA, through a travel and tourism grant made available through the American Rescue Plan Act.

And the next year, buoyed by this success, Kristina applied for a grant from the Recompete Pilot Program run by EDA — a brand new program created by Congress to provide large, flexible grants that help economically distressed communities increase their prime age employment.

That's where Garvan Donegan got involved. He manages Central Maine Growth Council, an economic development agency in nearby Waterville, home of Colby College.

[18:21]

DONEGAN: I remember collaborating with Main Street Skowhegan, vis-à-vis Kristina, getting a call probably at 8:30 at night, saying, you know, we gotta apply for this funding opportunity. It's due right around the corner for the phase one. And I said, you know what? I think you're right.

PIPA: Main Street Skowhegan partnered with the Central Maine Growth Council to put together a plan for the revitalization of Central Maine. They were chosen as one of 22 finalists out of 565 applicants, which actually made the program the most popular in EDA's history.

As a finalist, they received over \$400,000 to help them put more details together as they made their final submission for a \$50 million grant. But this time, they weren't chosen as one of the six final grantees.

[19:13]

DONEGAN: A key workforce development program, I believe, was one of the weaknesses in our U.S. EDA Recompete phase two application. It was good. It was maybe great. It wasn't a national model of excellence. And that still needed more work.

Came away realizing that maybe we needed a whole accelerator program just for workforce. And to hindsight maybe that's what we should have drafted in. But it was a lot. It was like doing six federal applications at once under a technical sprint.

Ultimately, what it showed us was the power of collaboration, and that this region could be nationally competitive.

PIPA: Putting all that time and effort into it, having a \$50 million investment so close, and then ... ouch! Rejection. Was the Recompete process worth it, I asked?

[20:07]

CANNON: The Recompete grant initiative as a whole, I think, really helped cement the fact that we really could punch above our weight class. And it was validated that we were an organization that is leading the charge, frankly, in rural America. And we started to really see ourselves as a rural development hub.

And, you know, I would say that if Main Street Skowhegan had not applied for the Recompete grant, we would not see ourselves as we do today. But we were able to not only convince the EDA that we were a legit organization with a number of partners that could move the needle in rural America, but we also started to believe more in ourselves.

[20:46]

DONEGAN: In many ways I see the Growth Council and Main Street Skowhegan as a little bit of a regional yin and yang. We had our historical context was regional economic development. And then particularly the last 10 years, almost playing like a Main Street organization. I think Kristina's done a fabulous job. She was a Main Street organization, and she's kind of now playing regionally.

PIPA: From Sam Hight's perspective, while it might have been disappointing, it certainly hasn't killed any momentum.

[21:16]

HIGHT: In our little town of 8,800, there's nearly a billion dollars of development going on, which is unheard of. And some of that is private-public partnerships, whether it's a CDS grant, the EDA grant, money coming in from large corporations. I think Skowhegan's been a pretty good case study on rural economic development.

PIPA: Listening to Sam makes me realize that's what's so unique about Skowhegan — the diversity of what's underway in town. New Balance and Sappi represent its traditional industries; Main Street Skowhegan is spearheading the development of a major new outdoor recreation economy; and civic leaders like Sam are making quality of life investments in housing and childcare. And lest we forget, Amber Lambke has made Skowhegan the center of a whole new regional economy built ... around grains.

[sound from mill]

Yep, that volunteer work to help their farmer's market, well that evolved into launching and running a gristmill called Maine Grains.

The operation is housed in what used to be the county jail — a 14,000-square foot Victorian building right in the center of town. Her office is an old jail cell, concrete walls and all. Turns out, it's an ideal building for milling! For one, it's tall — and that height means *gravity* moves the grain through the machines on the way down. The process is cheap, simple — and creates a more consistent product. The company focuses on traditional stone milling, locally sourced, organic, and heritage grains.

[sound from mill]

PIPA: So how do you take a former jail and turn it into this?

[23:12]

LAMBKE: So we've turned the former jail into a mill through a lot of concrete cutting initially. We had to cut out a lot of holes in the floors and ceiling to be able to lift our equipment up onto the floors in the building. And also to create the the piping and the hoses that make the movement of grain through the facility possible.

In this building we have stone mills that are just like the antique version only newly made that use big four foot diameter millstones to grind the grains into flour. And then we also have a whole suite of cleaning equipment that will allow us to sort grains on the basis of size or density or color.

PIPA: So what are we ... describe a couple of the machines that we're looking at right now.

LAMBKE: So on this floor you'll see machines in operation today. These are from Germany. These machines crack the husky coating off of oats to get to the edible groat on the inside, so it's separating the chaff from the grain, if you will. We're also running our Austrian stone mills today to grind flour.

PIPA: What are we smelling?

LAMBKE: There is an a beautiful smell in a mill. The air becomes infused with whatever grain you happen to be milling. So today we're milling wheat, and you smell a nice toasty note in the air. I can now tell just by smell if we're processing oats or if we're, they have a sweeter smell to them, or even some of the heritage grains have distinctively nutty aromas when you're milling and cracking open that kernel.

PIPA: I gotta say, she's right about those aromas, they are one of my best memories of my visit! Before Maine Grains ever got started, Amber was part of the Kneading Conference — you guessed it, K-N-E-A-D — which brought together farmers, millers, and bakers to answer the question: Could they bring back Maine's grain economy?

[25:33]

LAMBKE: So, Somerset County, where we are located in the center of the state of Maine, in the mid-1800s produced 259,000 bushels of wheat, which is enough to feed over a hundred thousand people, and we're a county of 50,000 people right now. So we can grow grains in Maine, that's what we learned at the first conference.

And then to answer the question of why aren't we? It was a matter of infrastructure. So we did not have the tools to clean and de-hull the grains that were being grown here to be able to eat them, to be able to make them food grade.

So we set out to build a business plan that would have a more regional scale. Not a national scale. We want to be a mill that is buying from our region, buying grains from our region to support farmers, milling, and providing core ingredients for bakers, brewers and chefs in the Northeast.

We can't give up grains as a crop just because it's cheaper to grow them in the Midwest.

PIPA: You know, Maine Grains has become ... kind of a big deal! Their story has been featured in several national publications. And Martha Stewart is a fan. She even had Amber on her show to talk about oats.

[26:43]

LAMBKE: We now work with over 45 or so different farmers throughout the Northeast, who bring us wheat, oats, spelts, rye, corn, heritage grains, buckwheat. And we have become known as a one-stop shop for lots of these different freshly milled organic and heritage grains as I mentioned, for bakers, brewers, and chefs.

PIPA: But it's not just Maine Grains here in the building. Amber's created a mini business district.

[27:13]

LAMBKE: We bought this big old jail building, and we leased out spaces in the building to other entrepreneurs that needed to expand or wanted to start up. So we do have a knit shop in our building that is run by four women who started the business to sell yarn, teach knitting. We donate space in this building to a volunteer community-run radio station. Because this was a jail and it had a ham radio tower on

the roof, we had radio aficionados say, don't ever sell that tower. And so a nonprofit arts group was formed in order to help to run this radio station that is volunteer run and on air 24/7.

We also leased space right below me, right below my office, to a cheese maker who needed to scale up her operation into a bigger space. The commercial kitchen in this building has been repurposed as a bakery and cafe that I also run under a different business name, the Miller's Table.

So we're really trying to tie all the pieces together for the community. I also felt like it was important that we serve the food we were producing here to the community. So if I was just a manufacturer of flour and I was exporting it out of this town via distribution to New England, where is this community going to get to taste those things if they are not comfortable with baking or cooking at home?

PIPA: And the humble farmer's market? These days it's held in the Maine Grains parking lot, with 20 regular sellers and a handful of guest vendors that runs throughout the year.

[28:47]

LAMBKE: It has defined our place as a hub of local food for the community and kind of a center of the community,.

PIPA: Amber's served in leadership roles with key institutions such as Maine's Board of Agriculture and the Maine Community Foundation. But she continues to serve close to home too.

LAMBKE: I did also throw my hat in for a seat on the select board here in Skowhegan a couple of years ago. I'm two years into a three-year term. And I really did that because I realized that well-balanced leadership on town boards is critical to making positive progress.

And I think especially in the times we're in right now, it is more important than ever to demonstrate the ways that we can have differences of opinion and still look out into the future and agree on where we're heading together and commit to making those hard decisions along the way, where it's going to take compromise and conversation and careful, thoughtful, moving things forward.

[29:50]

CANNON: The launch of Maine Grains really kind of helped Skowhegan, I think, start to think about itself differently. There was a sense of kind of discouragement, I think, among people earlier.

[music]

And the thought that Maine Grains could launch here, this kind of innovative mill. I think it was something that people didn't think could happen here. And it did. And I think that gave people hope.

PIPA: Kristina and Main Street Skowhegan have recognized the power of locally created enterprises such as Amber's and formed the Skowhegan Center for Entrepreneurship to support new businesses getting underway.

Patric Moore began working there in 2022. Unlike our other guests, Patric's not a Mainer by birth. He lived all over the country during his service in the Air Force and he moved to Maine in 2019. But he understands the dynamics at play in a rural place — he grew up in a small town outside of State College, Pennsylvania.

[30:50]

MOORE: Where I'm from, it's a very economically depressed area. People are weary of change. And there's not a lot of momentum behind the folks that do want to change things. There have been some successes, but it takes a village to really get get the ball moving.

And when I came to Skowhegan, I realized that the village is already moving. There's people here, there's movers and shakers, they are making things happen. Even when things don't go their way, they're extremely resilient. And they bounce back and the next day they ask, how do we continue to make this happen?

Everything, all my experiences in my life have led me back to a small town and seeing just that that hands-on approach and change that one can make, that impact. And realizing that, and this probably stems from growing up in a small town and realizing that no one is coming to save us. No one is coming to save the small town, the people that live there.

PIPA: The Center for Entrepreneurship is small — two conference rooms take up most of the space. But in a town the size of Skowhegan, it's really the *support* services that are more crucial for small businesses. Patric offers one-on-one coaching, business plan advising, and various workshops.

[32:08]

MOORE: We've also created our own programming. I run a successful program called Business Lab, which I will give credit to the Hannah Grimes Center for Entrepreneurship in Keene, New Hampshire. They were the ones that founded Business Lab and were so kind to lend us their curriculum to get started.

And so, I have run four cohorts now of Business Lab, 26 businesses, with a variety of success with those business owners. I've seen people be able to leave their jobs and go full-time into the business, be very successful. We've seen new businesses pop up in the downtown thanks to the program.

A lot of the folks that I work with are simply trying to start something small, live off of it, support their families. That's really what it comes down to. And supporting their community. They're not looking to get rich and famous. They're not trying to be an overnight success. They're just trying to live their life.

PIPA: The Business Lab ends with a pitch competition — the winner gets \$5,000. In its very first cohort, a Christmas tree farmer 10 minutes outside Skowhegan won the prize — and it made a big impact.

[33:13]

MOORE: He was able to take that \$5,000 and immediately, because it was right before Christmas, he bought a tree shaker and a wreath maker, and he was able to accelerate his production and his growth. And, he said, that \$5,000 he was able to leverage and he actually increased his sales by 80%.

So it's these small amounts of money can really make a large difference for these folks.

PIPA: The Center also runs a yearly technical assistance grant program supported by local banks. Small businesses can apply for microgrants — anywhere from \$500 to \$2,000.

Patric's also started programming for kids, so they can try their hand at pitching a business idea.

[33:58]

MOORE: I wanted to be more involved with the youth in the community, especially with helping them understand that being an entrepreneur is a viable path. College isn't always the only route for them, of course. May maybe that comes from my recruiting days. When I joined the Air Force, I didn't think college was for me. Now I have two associates, a bachelor's, a master's degree. All thanks to the government and the benefits I received from that.

But I want our students to realize there's so many more options in that living in a small town you don't have to leave.

PIPA: The CANOE program — that is, Career Access through National Service and Outdoor Education — is another effort to reach young Mainers. The joint project of Main Street Skowhegan and the University of Maine at Farmington is a career pathway program aimed at young people in the state's outdoor recreation industry. Kristina Cannon explains.

[34:54]

CANNON: We recognize our opportunity here as we look to become a future outdoor rec hub. What are we doing through our program to prepare the next generation of leaders for this outdoor recreation opportunity?

And so people will actually be able to work for us as an AmeriCorps member, serve for us, gain experience, and then they'll go through this credentialing process of training and knowledge. They'll come out with credits to the University at Maine at Farmington and automatic matriculation into the outdoor recreation business administration program. Or we'll help them get a job in the industry.

PIPA: Yeah, there's something special going on here in Central Maine along the Kennebec River. Just what the heck is in that water?! Sam Hight thinks it's the right combination of people coming together at the right time.

[35:41]

HIGHT: I think we got lucky with the right people either moving to town, the right people being part of the Main Streets and the Chamber and the town. But it's finding a group that cares. Sometimes that's hard because, you know, anyone can just go to a meeting. But if you go to a meeting and you care and you want to see change, then that matters. And then you build on the small wins, and I feel like we were able to get a bunch of small wins.

And as I tell anyone, if you want to invest any money in Maine, choose Skowhegan because we will figure out how to make it work. We get compared to Waterville a lot, but you know, Skowhegan doesn't have Colby, and we don't have the Alfonds.

[music]

We are a bootstrapping town that figures it out. And I don't know if that's because we got a lot of generational momentum. I don't know if the stars aligned and the universe is just very kind to us.

PIPA: That bootstrapping mentality has served the town well and created some confidence that the dreams for their community are within reach. And from Kristina Cannon's perspective — that's what the federal government should be supporting.

[37:02]

CANNON: I think the federal government certainly has a place in rural development, because we need support, we need policy support, we need funding support. But I also think that the federal government should support the work that's happening on the ground and the strategies that are happening on the ground versus dictating what the strategies should be.

PIPA: Technically, Skowhegan and its partners ended up as losers, or at least only partial winners, during the competition for the federal Recompete grant. An outsider might look at that and think, contrary to the sentiment Sam Hight shared earlier, that Skowhegan's luck has run out.

But that's not the character of this place. The town's civic leadership is undeterred. For them, the Recompete experience reaffirmed their vision, strengthened their collaboration and resolve, and boosted their confidence. They can see even *more* clearly what they're building towards and are as determined as ever to create the partnerships and support necessary to achieve it.

The diversity of the town's economic activities and initiatives is reminiscent of the array of beautiful fall colors I experienced during my visit there — a mosaic that makes this place strikingly one-of-a-kind.

Thanks for listening.

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My sincere thanks to all the people who shared their time with me for this episode.

[music]

To provide further policy insights based on this episode, we also publish a Q&A with an outside expert on the Brookings website. You can find the link in the show notes.

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If you liked the show, please consider giving it a five-star rating on the platform where you listen.

I'm Tony Pipa, and this is *Reimagine Rural*.

And thanks to the *Bangor Daily News*. That moose call footage was from them.