



# nerej

## **MEREDA spring conference highlights opportunities**

June 07, 2024 - Northern New England

Portland, ME On May 15th, the Maine Real Estate & Development Association (MEREDA) hosted its annual spring conference where close to 300 real estate professionals gathered at the Holiday Inn By the Bay to discuss designing development solutions that align with Maine's needs for the future. Housing creation is one of Maine's most significant needs and MEREDA's event provided an opportunity for industry professionals to hear different perspectives from local, regional, and national experts on this important and complex issue.

Craig Young

"Our spring conference is a time to look ahead at Maine's future. There is a critical need for more housing in our state and we need more developers to be involved in creative housing creation," said MEREDA president Craig Young. "It can be difficult to pencil out deals for these types of projects, which is why we organized this conference. There are opportunities, like historic tax credits and smart growth design, that can facilitate more projects coming together that will enrich our communities and meet the needs of our state."

The event kicked off with a presenter who provided a national perspective, Jonathan Tate, an architect from New Orleans. Tate's international practice is centered around housing development and planning in both rural and urban communities. His creative land use opens up opportunities for density, sustainability, and affordability in unique ways. "There are opportunities if you can imagine them," he said. Tate shared several examples of his innovative work, including developing projects on small, non-conforming lots and working with a non-profit to build a reentry housing project for individuals exiting the incarceration system. Full of creative design and committed to building more housing, Tate's work demonstrates how a closer relationship between architects and developers can enable more imaginative construction and problem-solving.

Tate's presentation was followed by a panel discussion on leveraging historic tax credits for real estate growth. Panelists included Jonathan Culley, principal at Redfern Properties; John Egan, senior program officer for strategic initiatives at the Genesis Fund; and Nate Marcet, a CPA from Albin, Randall & Bennet. The panel was moderated by Marieke Thormann, vice president of development at Fathom Companies. The group explored the layers of complexity involved in using historic tax credits while also noting how they are an extremely powerful tool for revitalizing communities. Redfern's recent transformation of the Mercy Hospital campus in Portland, which will

add 171 housing units, provided an excellent example of how the historic tax credit can work.

The afternoon continued with an economic presentation from Kenneth Entenmann, the chief investment officer and chief economist at NBT Bank. His macro economic discussion included in-depth examination of the definition of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a way to illustrate the economy's strong environment, as well as discussions on the housing shortage and the federal debt. Playing with the idea of what "normal" is for the economy, Entenmann urged everyone to manage their expectations around interest rates, arguing that today's rates are actually normal, while the low rates of the past few years were abnormal. Summing things up, Entenmann said, "The economy is not the greatest. It's not the worst. But it is a great business environment."

After a recognition of MEREDA's 2023 Notable Project recipients, the conference concluded with a panel discussion on smart growth and urban development featuring Kevin Kraft and Nell Donaldson from the city of Portland and Tyler Norod, development director at Westbrook Development Corp. The panel was moderated by Jonathan Tate. Kraft and Donaldson started the discussion by providing an overview of the City of Portland's ReCode project to update and simplify Portland's zoning and development ordinances. A large undertaking that came out of Portland's 2017 comprehensive plan, the ReCode project has been working to get the public involved in the technical work of planning for the future of the city, as well as establishing goals for what future growth in the city should include. Kraft and Donaldson discussed Portland's focus on developing complete neighborhoods that are walkable and bikeable, and establishing Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) zones to catalyze development along public transit routes. Embedded in the work of ReCode is the concept of smart growth and Norod provided a real-life example of how this approach can revitalize neighborhoods. Built through his work with Avesta, the West End Apartments in South Portland transformed a vacant lot into a mixed-use housing development that improved the neighborhood. With wider sidewalks and first-floor retail spaces, the project illustrates the importance of human-scale design for fostering connection. Norod, an affordable housing advocate, highlighted how affordable housing needs affordable land, which is tied directly to municipal infrastructure. He spoke about the need for more Maine communities to build more housing at a density that is appropriate for each community. "We need to think holistically about development. We need to plan well and design well. The table needs to be set."

With our dire need for more housing, having creative solutions and a better understanding of the tools and mechanisms for making development deals work is essential for Maine's future. MEREDA's spring conference brought people together from across industries to learn about the opportunities for smart growth and responsible development so more projects that have goals aligned with the needs of our communities can be built.