Final Notice and Public Review of a Proposed Activity in a Floodplain – Caribou, Maine

To: All Interested Agencies, Groups, and Individuals

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) is considering whether to fund the following Proposed Action under its Catalyst program. NBRC has prepared an 8-Step Decision-Making Process review in compliance with Executive Order (EO) 11988 (Floodplain Management) as amended by EO 13690 (Establishing a Federal Flood Risk Management Standard and a Process for Further Soliciting and Considering Stakeholder Input), which established a more protective standard for evaluating flood risk to ensure projects funded by the Federal government are more resilient to the impacts of flooding.

The City of Caribou is seeking funds from NBRC through the Catalyst Program to contribute to Riverfront Master Plan and Water Street Redevelopment project. The City of Caribou proposes to (1) develop a Riverfront Master Plan; (2) acquire the former train station property (1.6 acres) and abandoned starch plant property (1.2 acres) on Water Street; and (3) renovate the interior of the former train station interior (2,800 square feet) and demolish the abandoned starch plant (9,200 square feet). NBRC has determined that the Proposed Action's footprint exists within a floodplain and warrants an analysis under the 8-Step Decision-Making Process. The applicant considered and dismissed the following alternatives:

No Action Alternative: The No Action Alternative would result in no federal funds supporting the Riverfront Master Plan and Water Street Redevelopment project. If the Proposed Action was not implemented, the Riverfront Master Plan would not be developed, the train station would not be renovated and restored, the starch plant would remain abandoned, and the downtown riverfront area would remain blighted and vacant. The No Action Alternative would not address the needs of the community to maintain and enhance the historical, cultural and environmental qualities of the riverfront area; promote economic development, tourism, recreation and environmental protection; and enhance the sense of place for Caribou.

Redesign the proposal: A possible redesigned proposal for the Riverfront Master Plan and Water Street Redevelopment project is to acquire the starch plant property (1.2 acres), but not disturb the existing starch plant building (9,200 square feet). If the starch plant was not demolished, the building would remain abandoned and the downtown riverfront area would remain blighted and vacant. The redesigned proposal would not address the needs of the community to maintain and enhance the historical, cultural and environmental qualities of the riverfront area; promote economic development, tourism, recreation and environmental protection; and enhance the sense of place for Caribou.

Nature-based alternative: EO 13690 requires federal agencies to consider nature-based approaches when developing project alternatives. "Nature-based approach" is an umbrella term for project features designed to mimic, restore, manage, and conserve natural processes to increase resilience.[1] Nature-based approaches were considered as alternatives to the Proposed Action. However, no viable nature-based alternatives were identified that would still meet the need of the Proposed Action.

Due to the location of the Proposed Action within a Federal Flood Risk Management Standard (FFRMS) floodplain, it is not feasible to design or modify the project in a way that completely avoids the potential impacts to property, lives, and floodplain health and function. However, the applicant has identified the following actions to minimize these potential impacts:

Property Impacts: The Proposed Action includes the acquisition and demolition of the abandoned starch plant, which is located within an FFRMS floodplain. There is a significant risk of recurring flood damage to the existing starch plant building. Removing buildings below the base flood elevation reduces the risk of flood damage. Demolition of the starch plant building removes the most valuable or sensitive part of the development in the most vulnerable area within the site. Due to the topography of the property, retaining walls may need to be constructed and/or fill imported to create sloped sides along the street and railroad. The Proposed Action incorporates materials that are less susceptible to water damage in an area likely to be impacted by floodwaters. The City of Caribou is informed about the availability and importance of flood insurance, particularly in high-risk areas such as the starch plant property.

[1] Nature-based approaches can take the form of green infrastructure or natural infrastructure. Green infrastructure consists of projects that combine gray infrastructure with nature-based solutions to create hybrid systems that improve resilience to climate impacts, while natural infrastructure consists of projects that use natural landscapes to increase resilience to climate impacts.

Impacts to Lives: Demolition of the starch plant building is the primary mitigation measure, as it removes the risks associated with flood events and indoor air contamination from vapor intrusion. As a result, there is no need to implement flood warning systems, design features for occupant safety, or vapor mitigation systems for indoor air quality.

Impacts to Floodplain Health and Function: A qualified Environmental Professional (EP) is required to provide oversight of building demolition and construction activities due to urban fill, petroleum, lead and arsenic contamination in soil and groundwater at the starch plant property. The appropriate erosion control measures will be installed before demolition or construction activity begins and maintained until the site is permanently stabilized to prevent unreasonable soil erosion and sedimentation beyond the site or into a protected natural resource (river, stream, wetland). Site development and sediment controls to be employed during demolition and construction activities include dust control measures (water sprays) to minimize airborne contaminant spread, protecting floodplain air and water quality, and sediment barriers (silt fence, straw wattles, erosion control mix berms) downgradient of disturbed soils to prevent sediment runoff from entering water bodies, preserving floodplain soil and water integrity.

Proper management and disposal of demolition debris will avoid accidental releases of building materials, supporting floodplain health. Demolition debris will be transported in covered vehicles to prevent material loss and the spread of contaminants. Any demolition debris not directly loaded into covered vehicles for transport will be stored in secure, covered areas to prevent contaminants from entering floodplain water bodies. Any contaminated soils encountered during demolition or construction activities will be covered with tarps or geotextile barriers to prevent contaminants from spreading into nearby water bodies. This measure helps maintain floodplain water quality by managing on-site pollutants (urban fill, petroleum, lead, arsenic).

Slope stabilization and reinforcement will be designed in accordance with construction specifications outlined in the Maine Erosion and Sediment Control BMPs Manual for Designers and Engineers. Retaining walls will be stepped or tiered to minimize obstruction and maintain floodplain capacity, helping to preserve natural water flow and floodplain function. Drainage channels, bioswales and/or vegetated swales will be designed to manage increased surface runoff and direct water flow away from sensitive floodplain areas to prevent sediment and contaminant transport. When feasible, native vegetation will be planted along retaining walls to enhance natural floodplain function and reduce water velocity, helping to minimize localized flooding risks.

Any fill imported on or near the floodplain will be limited to the greatest extent possible to avoid disrupting natural water flow. Fill will be compacted in layers to retain permeability and allow groundwater recharge, helping to maintain floodplain function. When feasible, semi-permeable or permeable fill materials will be used to enhance infiltration and reduce runoff, helping to maintain floodplain hydrology. Organic matter and/or soil amendments may be incorporated to improve soil structure and reduce compaction, helping to support floodplain permeability and water absorption. Hydroseeding, mulch and/or erosion control blankets will be applied to exposed soils immediately after demolition and construction activities to stabilize soils and prevent erosion that could degrade floodplain function.

It is NBRC's determination that the importance of the Proposed Action in the floodplain outweighs the requirements of EO 11988 and EO 13690 to avoid direct or indirect support of floodplain development and reduce the risk of flood loss. Files that document compliance with Steps 1 through 6 of EO 11988 (as amended by EO 13690) are available for public inspection upon request. Please send an email request to nepa@nbrc.gov. The 8-Step Decision-Making Process materials will be provided in electronic format unless a hard copy is specifically requested.

This notice provides people who may be affected by activities in the floodplain and those who have an interest in the protection of the natural environment with an opportunity to express their concerns and provide information. NBRC is accepting comments on this notice for seven (7) days from November 5, 2024, through the end of the day of November 11, 2024.

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