

Group planning

A chat with Jane Lafleur, executive director of Camden nonprofit Friends of Midcoast Maine

BY MINDY FAVREAU

In 2004, when the Maine Department of Transportation announced its plans to widen a section of Route One in Camden, Jane Lafleur received a flood of phone calls. Lafleur, executive director of Camden nonprofit Friends of Midcoast Maine, fielded calls from residents worried about the 80 or so trees planned for removal. Faced with a horde of upset citizens, the Maine DOT also called Lafleur, looking for a way to diffuse the situation.

In response, Lafleur orchestrated a tree-to-tree site walk to determine why each tree had been marked for the chopping block, and if any could remain. As a result, the DOT kept a "good number" of trees, Lafleur says — she can't remember how many — preserving the canopy that hangs over the town's historic district of B&Bs and traditional New England homes. It was a collaborative effort that would spur the creation of the Route One planning project called Gateway 1.

"I think that was a real feather in our cap, and also a turning point for DOT, because things could be done a different way," Lafleur says.

That different way is consensus building, which has been the focus of Friends of Midcoast Maine since it was created in 2000. The nonprofit organization helps nearly 50 midcoast communi-



The mediator: Jane Lafleur of Friends of Midcoast Maine helps towns make difficult decisions on municipal growth

ties from Brunswick to Bucksport walk that tricky line between growth and preservation by facilitating town discussions and doling out information on issues like zoning, land use and sensible growth.

Lafleur, who previously worked as a city planner in Vermont and New Hampshire, has been executive director of the nonprofit for five years. She's seen the nonprofit's work as a consultant for comprehensive planning projects grow, as more towns are faced with the decisions that come along with growing pains.

Mainebiz recently sat down with Lafleur to discuss the development decisions the midcoast area is facing, and the importance of pushing collaboration between communities. The following is an edited transcript.

Mainebiz: What kinds of projects does Friends of Midcoast Maine get involved in?

Jane Lafleur: We get involved in all kind of things, especially when communities call on us. We see our focus as three-pronged: We do what we call education — sensible growth education — we talk to people about the planning tools that are available to them to help them make better land use decisions. We do project endorsements, which are working with a developer to help shape the project in a way that meets smart growth criteria... And then we do a little bit of advocacy, when we're asked to come in and testify on an issue, or get involved in some other kind of project that's facing the region. Our main focus really is helping communities cope with change and growth, and finding ways that they can be better prepared for it, and how they can involve their citizens in these important decisions.

What are some recent projects you've worked on?

We did some work up in Bar Harbor. I was part of the consulting team; [Friends of Midcoast Maine's part-time planner] Beth Della Valle was the lead at that point — she wasn't working for us at that time. And we helped them write their comprehensive plan, which is basically the framework for the town, how they want to grow and develop. That was last year; we wrapped it up six months ago, perhaps, maybe a little longer. And they overwhelmingly approved it. I think it was an 83% approval rate, which is pretty phenomenal.

And Bar Harbor is out of our region — it's down on one of the other peninsulas — but it was an opportunity to help the consultant team, and to really get involved in some of those issues. And it also became some income for the organization, because as you may know many nonprofits these days are struggling, and it's harder and harder, and we're all competing for funds, so we have to find innovative ways to produce income, and that was one of them.

How does Friends of Midcoast Maine get involved with a town's planning process? Do municipalities contact you?

Usually when towns want to hire a consultant to do a comprehensive plan or another type of work, they put out an RFP — a request for proposals. Then anybody who's a consultant or does that kind of work puts in a proposal, and we were hired [by Bar Harbor] as one in a team of three people. So Friends of Midcoast Maine was just a piece of that whole team. We didn't lead the whole project. But we now have been hired by the town of Islesboro to work on their

Friends of Midcoast Maine

88 Elm St., Camden

Executive director: Jane Lafleur

Founded: 2000

Employees: Lafleur, plus a part-time planner

Service: Friends of Midcoast Maine consults with towns on comprehensive planning and land use issues, and educates communities about sensible growth

Annual budget: \$125,000

Contact: 236-1077

www.friendsmidcoast.org

comprehensive plan.

And we get involved in other things when asked. I've reviewed ordinances for some towns, because they just want another set of eyes to look at them. We've facilitated some meetings and discussions on issues that towns are facing, and they just want somebody on the outside who can run the meeting and [who they can] ask to help them deal with some of those tough

sions they have to make about growth and change. We have recently been working with Damariscotta on some future planning work that they want to do, on where they want to grow, and how they want to grow, and how they can involve the citizens to help make those decisions.

What are some of the ways that you help towns figure out how they want to grow?

One of the things that we discovered, and this is common, is that you have to show it visually. In Bar Harbor, for instance, we showed through a mapping person on the consulting team where growth and development has occurred over the last 10, 20, 30, 40 years, and where their comprehensive plan says they wanted growth and development to occur. And at the beginning it was pretty much where they thought it was going to occur, along the highways. And it did, but then after a while it started going in, and the growth and development was occurring in the very areas they wanted to protect.

And it wasn't that they did something wrong, it was because they didn't do something to protect those areas. And that's what's happening everywhere.

You've been on the steering committee for the Gateway 1 project for three years. What has that work been like?

[It's] a huge planning project orchestrated by DOT, but it's really ground-up, bottom-up planning. The same 21 towns that I deal with are involved along the Route One corridor. It's been going on for three years. It's a massive planning process to help integrate land use decisions — those are the things that towns do, that decide what can go where, and when, and how a town can develop — and transportation decisions.

So Gateway 1 is a way to first of all get towns to talk to each other, because what I do in my town has an effect on what happens in the town next to me and sometimes beyond that. And it's to get people to think about how we want the whole region to grow. What do we want to look like in 25, 30, 40, 50 years?

One of the analogies was, are we a string of pearls, where Wiscasset is a pearl, and Brunswick is a pearl, and Damariscotta is a pearl, and Rockland is? But what happens between the pearls? Is it a strip development? Then you kind of lose your pearls, and it's kind of a blob. Or are we kind of micropolitan areas, as they say, which are much more dense, maybe larger pearls? And how do we want to grow? Or do we just want to be a massive strip, like we see Route One has become south of us?

How hard is it to get the different communities to collaborate and think regionally?

Well, it's interesting. A couple of years ago, we started these meetings which we now call Midcoast Maine Matters Meetings, and they're regional meetings. We have one up here, Camden-Rockport and north, then we have another one in the Damariscotta-Newcastle area. And it was to get people who are working on their comprehensive plans from different towns to sit down and talk to each other. And some of these meetings are just remarkable, when, for instance, somebody said, "Well, in our comprehensive plan, we want this part of our town to be a conservation area, we want it preserved, we don't want much housing here, or growth and development, but another part of the town would be appropriate." But the abutting town right on the same town line, said, "Well, that's our growth area."

So, all the sudden, the light bulbs went off, like, "We should be talking to each other — why aren't we talking to each other?" Because if your growth area is here, and that's our conservation area, we're going to affect each other, we're going to spill over, and maybe we better rethink this.

But in the Gateway 1 process, these 21 towns, and two representatives from these towns, have been coming together for three years, and rarely does someone miss a meeting. We're in it because we care about the future.

It seems like a big issue in the midcoast right now is whether or not to allow big-box stores to build there, like Damariscotta's effort to keep Wal-Mart and other big-box stores from building there in 2006. Was Friends of Midcoast Maine involved in that?

We were the fiscal sponsor for Our Town Damariscotta. All that means is that, because Our Town Damariscotta, the group that orchestrated the size cap, was not a 501(c)(3), which is a nonprofit organization, and they didn't know how long they were going to stay around after that issue, they needed someone to be able to serve as a 501(c)(3) and do the financial management for them. So we accepted a check from them, and then gave them back the money.

I think some of our members would have supported that, some would have not. We have a pretty broad donor base, and even on our board I think we have a mixed opinion about big-box stores. There's two issues. One is the effect on your locally owned businesses. There's no doubt the research has shown that they take business from other businesses, it doesn't matter what big box it is. And then of course there's all the environmental and other kinds of impacts that occur with a big-box store.

I think we have folks that are very concerned about those issues, there's no doubt about that. We have other people that I think are concerned about letting a town determine their future, and I think in that case, that's what Damariscotta did: They put it before the voters and they voted in favor of the size cap, as did many of the surrounding communities.

Our message is to make sure people are

involved in the decision making and know what the cost and the benefit of the decisions they make. We don't really dictate what the future of a town should be, we don't even predict or project, we talk to people about what the costs are.

So what kinds of people generally call looking for information?

We have members who pay dues and they support our efforts, and those people often contact us for information. Sometimes they hear about something we're doing and they want to find out more, or they just are interested in these issues. But there are also people who are lay-people, who sit on planning boards, on comprehensive committees, selectmen, conservation commissions, who are making decisions or recommendations for towns, so they often will call because they need planning assistance. There are other places they can go as well. But sometimes they want more information, and that's what we can provide. Mostly, I refer people to other sources or I have specific documents I can send them, or we have a workshop on conservation subdivisions, for instance, and they come.

You mentioned earlier the difficulty of finding funding. Where does the group's funding come from?

Most new organizations start out with grants from foundations, and we had our share, and we were very fortunate. As you get older, you have to find other ways to take the place of the grants, because I think most foundations like to fund newer start-up organizations. Some are wonderful and continue to support out mission and have been very generous. So we try for a third of our funding to be from donors and members, a third to be from grants, and a third to be from other resources like income-earning resources, where we do comprehensive planning or facilitate a meeting, or some type of technical expertise that we can charge from, or including things like attending workshops and programs that we run.

So what do you think the midcoast will look like in 10 years?

I don't have a crystal ball, but if the Gateway 1 project planning process really alerts people to how growth is going to or could occur under certain scenarios, then people may be motivated to make different decisions than they would have otherwise. So I think it's going to start some new conversations between towns on how they want this region to look, or what I call sub-regions like the Camden-Rockport-Lincolnville-Northport area, and the Rockland-Thomaston-Warren-Waldoboro area. So I think that people will start to really make some tough decisions on how they want that to grow and change. I have a lot of faith in that process. We just have to make sure people know about it and get involved in it.

Mindy Favreau, MaineBiz staff reporter, can be reached at mfavreau@mainebiz.biz.

©Copyright MaineBiz 2008