

The Sprawling Midcoast

A Series of Four Workshops

Summary

This is a summary of the workshops held in Knox and Waldo Counties during February, March and April 2002

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Sponsors

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These summaries are not intended to be the formal record.



A grassroots initiative for sensible growth.

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Workshop #1 - *Patterns of Growth: a Regional and Local View*

Problem: We are faced with the loss of our working landscape and open space and residential gentrification and displacement.

Issues

- We are losing rural maine and have this one generation to make the choice.
- Without population growth there has been substantial redistribution (spreading out) of the population—losing open space and increasing auto-dependency.
- In Maine, from 1970 to 2000, we converted more land to development than in our entire previous history—with a projected doubling by 2010 based on existing trends.
- We are creating Sprawl—low-density development with long roads, deep frontages, dead end streets, without walkability, auto-oriented, with little floor to area ratio, with lots of parking, strip development, with a large separation between residential areas and other land uses, providing for mostly single family, and a commuter-dependent lifestyle.
- There are severe fiscal, environmental, and social/quality of life costs from Sprawl.
 - The character of our communities is irrevocably changed.
 - Fiscal Costs include: new schools, roads, infrastructure, and safety services.
 - Our environmental response has been to de-concentrate: “the solution to pollution is dilution.”
 - We are losing farmland.

Possible steps towards solution

- Revise Comprehensive Plans paying particular attention to implementation and implementation planning.
- Change density requirements: densities of *1 acre or less* in growth areas and *25 acres in non-growth areas*.
- Provide a vehicle for the Transfer Development Rights.
- Recreate each of our downtowns as a Working Downtown Center

Definition of a Working Downtown Center

- Serve at least two primary roles for that marketplace (arts, government, office, retail).
- Needs two-three ancillary roles and one of those needs to be residences, including apartments on second and third floors.
- Needs to allow street parking
- Needs rental spaces at a variety of prices. May need to build up. (May need to *form a local development corporation*.)

Workshop #2-Farmland or Subdivision? Preserving Landscapes and Open Spaces

Problem: We need to preserve our local working landscapes and family farms:

Issues:

- The idea that farming is dead is a MYTH, but it's not thriving either. It is not a single industry, but many different sectors, some thriving, some not.
- Farm sales in central Maine grew by more than 5% each year. "If that was happening in any other industry, Angus would call this a new growth sector!"
- Farming has been in transition for the last 400 years. But the difference now is: Will we get to the next stage and still have farmland?
- Working landscapes are our heritage. They preserve open space and are a major economic resource for our community and our society.
- Farms are probably the best land use for a community, because farms pay a high rate of taxes versus what they use for services. Explore community planning as in Unity.

Possible steps towards solution

- Keep farms in agriculture uses to maintain a critical mass of land in agriculture.
- The Midcoast region should be fostering farm development. Use available tools.
- Work to boost farm income and reduce land taxes
- Reduce or modify regulations (environmental)
- Develop effective state farm business programs
- Allow transfers of farms to future generations
- Increase access to training for business planning and provide for access to funds
- Promote positive community attitudes and supportive land use policies.
- Serious need for a lot of laborers.

NEED: Strong Community Vision, Political Willpower, Patience, and Experiment!

Twelve ways citizens and local governments can help keep maine farms and farmland growing:

1. Inventory your local agricultural resources.
2. Measure and analyze how agricultural businesses contribute to the local economy.
3. Work with local farmers to form an agricultural protection task force or committee.
4. Support agricultural laws and measures that protect farms from nuisance suits, eminent domains taking and state regulations that interfere with farming.
5. Create incentives for landowners to voluntarily keep land in agriculture.
6. Provide property tax relief by encouraging farmer participation in the Maine Farm and Open Space Tax Program.
7. Discourage land uses that put pressure on nearby agricultural operations.
8. Review comprehensive plan and land-use ordinances and make adjustments and pass reforms that address the needs of agriculture.
9. Support farming and encourage its economic viability by offering technical assistance in marketing and promotion.
10. Work with the Maine Department of Agriculture's Division of Marketing, Production and Development "Get Real. Get Maine" buy local campaign.
11. Include agriculture in local economic development plans.
12. Recruit new farmers to your community.

Lessons Learned from the Town of Unity

1. Community Planning = REACTIVE

- Includes Adopted and Approved Comprehensive Plan and Ordinances.
- Ordinance Provisions include Agricultural Setbacks—to permit farming activities.
- Large lot flexibility allows larger density requirements to enable farmer to sell a couple lots with less potential impact on him.
- Density Bonuses if farmland preserved.
- Requires all retail development in the downtown and permits small lots.
- Requires design standards in the downtown.

2. Community Development Organization—Unity Barn Raisers = PROACTIVE

- Operates as a community organizer by: buying available space, sponsoring businesses in growth district (Market Day), sponsoring a community meals program, serving as a land trust, and securing funds for business assistance.
- Evaluates and addresses impediments to downtown/growth area success. (For example, parking was a hindrance to proper use of downtown, thus re-parceled land; and used CDBG/MDOT funds to buy/build parking lot, plant 60 street trees, install new sidewalks and connector between downtown and college/library to encourage people to use the village center.

TOOLS:

American Farmland Trust - was created to focus on farmland protection at the local level and coordinate state policy recognizing local distinctions.

Farm and Open Space Tax Program – is a tool so that current use is taxed at agricultural rate vs. regular rate. Tool not working because it needs more enrollment and fewer barriers to enrollment. Only 11% of farmland is in the program, thus many changes are underway. Obstacles remain at local level: tremendous difference in assessed values and the perception of a tax loss vs. a tax shift. State does not own up to ability to reimburse localities for loss.

Land For Maine's Future – enables the purchase of development rights on farmland, opportunities for market value, assists farmers and planners to protect farmland while planning development, and creates a deed restriction on title that prohibits uses for other than farmland.

Workshop #3 – Does Residential Density Fit In My Town?

Problem: Making the right Residential Density fit for each town and village:

Issues:

- Camden has had a smart growth plan for 10 years. Village district is 10,000 square foot if on a sewer; 40,000 if on a septic under current zoning with plans to reduce to 20,000. Smart growth planning is working in Camden: 65% - 75% of growth occurred in their designated growth areas.
- How do we translate to small towns? Can't translate exactly. Camden has infrastructure (sewer/water), commercial activity and public spaces.
- Union is trying to create land use patterns consistent with their circumstances and opportunities. Route 17, Union Common are growth districts. Proposed Village District no less than 20,000 sq ft. East Union has small lot sizes as in the historic village. Highway is the commercial district and the rest of town left as general development .
- Union Planning Board is looking at a large Agricultural District. Town assessor created colored map illustrating farm growth, working farm, and tree growth. The Planning board will designate this swath through the town as an Agricultural District.
- A State Planning Office study reports that 40% of homebuyers would choose neighborhoods over cul de sac type of developments. For older population privacy looks less attractive and proximity looks good. *We used to build neighborhoods until the '50 and '60's.*

Possible Steps toward Solution

- Experiment: Midcoast Code Officers Association looking for sponsor of bill to eliminate the state minimum lot size if they can get an approved septic system on the site.
- Change Comprehensive Plans and Zoning to allow Traditional Neighborhoods. Explore Dunsten Corner, West Rockport and Belfast experiences.
- Clearly define growth districts and outline uses to be encouraged.

Belfast—Tara Mew Neighborhood Housing Development —On the Edge of Compact Zone

Site advantages. A neighborhood with well-established 19th century housing, walking distance to city park and downtown, easy visibility onto community space, hospital, good road configuration and a mixed income area.

Market. Consists of people who would like to live on own piece of property and own their home, but are happy to have someone else provide maintenance. Supposition is people would like to have greatest amount of privacy and space possible as in a detached house.

Design Features. 26 units, 1600 square feet, two car garage, fireplaces, on-ground level master suite, community space, four different building types, same floor plan, 30% of site on green space, network of paths and green space, garden lots, 20' roads, and city sewer and water (all at developer's expense). From early on, challenge of site planning was to plan so it broke down into smaller pieces and gave sense of belonging. Cost \$200,000 to \$210,000.

Community Support: Professional planner and supportive planning board and town officials critical.

Dunsten Corner, Scarborough:

450 Units of Housing on 80 Acres with 70 Acres of Open Space

We're talking about building "neighborhoods" because the word "density" conjures a negative image. Normally a developer looks at ordinances and then does what is allowed within the ordinances. Instead, this developer went to the community with a blank sheet and said to community "This is what current zoning allows. We think there's a better way. Will you work with us?"

The Chamber of Commerce went to an Evan Richart breakfast and "got religion." Then they held a series of breakfasts to learn about neighborhoods and what that word really means.

Neighbors learned the economics of development, cash flow, and discussed what amenities a neighborhood could have. Neighbors met on Saturday afternoons, divided into 3 teams, each designed their "neighborhood" plan and presented to whole group. They then pulled out common elements in all three plans and developers went out and drew up a plan based on the neighbors' plans. Plans included commercial uses, housing above businesses, elderly living area, on street parking, garages facing rear alley, service drives, neighborhood streets.

Current zoning does not allow Maine's traditional village development which was based upon: on-street parking, garages facing rear, alleys, service drives, people on the street, no big garage doors facing the street, apartments above businesses, neighborhood schools, mixed uses, diversity of price ranges, some rental housing and sidewalks.

West Rockport—Traditional Neighborhood

Maine has 500 municipalities. Only Rockport has a traditional neighborhood ordinance. This is the result of community involvement (Charette) in planning the ordinance (residents, town officials, state officials, fire marshal, DEP, and army corps of engineers). The result was a neighborhood ordinance with public greens, less factory-like civic structures, street trees, sidewalks and interconnectedness, and mix uses.

Current pattern of growth creates separation of community! We are fast losing our meeting places in a community (in front of library, church, post office). Villages are important because they bring people together and encourage community unlike the mall.

Twenty years ago zoning came into Maine. It is suburban: separates uses and demands large lots. All villages and towns became non-conforming. Suburbs are designed around the auto. Everything connects with the car—wide roads, no crosswalks, no sidewalks. Today it is likely to be difficult to place church in a subdivision.

There are many local examples of old patterned villages designed for people, for community:

We see the relationship between village and rural and open space lands. **Bucksport:** narrow roads, houses close together. **Thomaston:** with mixed uses (churches, ball fields), open spaces in outer areas. **Millville:** Camden can spin off another village center (10 min is as far as people willing to walk, beyond that, spin off to other centers). **Northport:** Bay Community with 1/10 of an acre or less on waterfront. **Rockland:** with porches, sidewalks, crosswalks.

Workshop #4—Regional Action for Smart Growth: Summary of Key Points

Problem: Maine has a shortage of Affordable Housing, Workforce Housing

Issues:

- High income transplants and retirees are driving up the median home price.
- Affordability in Belfast is the worst in the state.
- A large part of the population is disenfranchised from home ownership.
- Local communities in the Midcoast should examine their restrictive zoning and ordinances, which in many cases are restrictive to allowing affordable housing.
- The Midcoast culture and values are threatened because of the increasing change in demographics.

Possible Steps to Solution

- Change local and state policies and begin with land use.
- Consider Workforce Housing Criteria Model.
- Work with the Affordable Housing Coalition.
- Understand the Housing Affordability Goal: produce quality community design, construction, discourage sprawl and encourage the American dream.
- Do conservation planning – identify key areas to protect. Work with local land trust.
- Foster collaboration among many organizations with common goals—create coalitions.
- Instill protection of critical resources. “See that multi-generational family properties stay the way they had been, permanently for both families and community.”
- More funds should be invested in existing housing.
- Work regionally.

Work Regionally

- The Midcoast operates as a region.
- Effects of Sprawl are regional. The transportation system fosters regional growth; housing prices depend not just on town but on a region; the affordable housing gap started in the south and is moving north; and the aesthetic appeal is the regional. Sprawl does not respect town boundaries.
- The planning structure in Maine represents regional and statewide structures. “It is like a Nordic track in the basement. Just not used.”
- Although we lack regional planning we do have: regional water quality systems, regional bicycle trails, regional project referrals, regional affordable housing planning, and regional economic development. Not every town needs a Wal-Mart or a business park.
- We have a Regional Planning Commission but no Regional Plan, not all towns are involved.

Steps to Create Regional Approach to Planning:

- Support your comprehensive plan, challenge it, and make sure it includes smart growth measures.
- Show up at selectmen’s meetings. Convince them to talk to adjoining towns.
- Support smart growth proposals and grants.
- Encourage towns to join the regional planning commission.

Recommendations for Coalition:

1. Concentrate on Comprehensive Plans: work on ordinance and implementation.
2. Promote the Plans to both residents and elected officials.
3. Develop a regional model—something that works here—and can be adopted by others.
4. Build a working collaboration.
5. Engage representation for each town.

Land Trust Role in the Preservation of Open Space

- Land trusts identify critical natural resource areas and preserve them in various ways.
- Land trusts protect bio-diversity, natural resources, and scenic resources.
- Land trusts work with landowners.
- Land trusts also provide public access.
- Land trusts have a great impact on containment of sprawl by protecting key resources.

www.sprawlwatch.org “Green Infrastructure” – articulates why towns need to focus on **both** natural resources and the built infrastructure – schools, roads, etc.