

NORTHEAST HARBOR VILLAGE CENTER PLAN



COMMUNITY OUTREACH REPORT

April 11, 2016

Introduction

This report outlines the results of the Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan community outreach activities. The goal of this work was to actively seek input from a variety of village and town stakeholders about existing conditions in the village of Northeast Harbor and concerns about its future. It also sought to identify a future vision for the village. This vision will guide later aspects of the plan and shape recommendations for development and infrastructure improvements over the next 10 years.

A variety of outreach efforts, both in person, on line and via a mailed and hand distributed community questionnaire were used to gather this information. Ultimately, these activities promote a sense of local stewardship for the plan and ensure that each resident has had the opportunity to help shape the future of the village. In addition, community participation and feedback is critical

in identifying key issues, local priorities, and proposed solutions. To date, the activities outlined below have been conducted. Additional activities are planned for subsequent portions of plan development.

- Regular meetings of the Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan Committee
- An issues workshop with the Village Plan Committee
- A public outreach meeting for town residents
- A property owner, business owner and prime stakeholder outreach meeting
- An outreach program at the July 2015 Summer Residents Association meeting
- Facebook updates
- A community questionnaire

Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan Committee Workshop

The Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan Committee is a committee of village residents, business owners, and town officials. It represents the community in this planning process and directs and reviews all work undertaken by the consulting team contracted to complete the plan. By reviewing all documents and recommendations, the Committee ensures that the Village Center Plan reflects the vision and aspirations of residents and stakeholders.

On November 12, 2015 an outreach workshop was held with the Village Center Plan Committee to discuss issues and opportunities in Northeast Harbor's village center. The workshop centered around three key questions.

- What are five issues or concerns facing Northeast Harbor's village center?
- What are three specific projects or actions you would like to see undertaken within the village center?
- What are the primary strengths and assets of Northeast Harbor's village center?

The following is a summary of the comments and opinions recorded in response to these three questions. While the questions brought forth a wide variety of topics, many of these issues were interrelated and in agreement with the responses of other participants. These general themes are outlined below.

Top Issues:

Affordability

Affordability was a primary concern of committee members. This included the lack of affordable housing, the high cost of goods including groceries and land costs

that were beyond the means of most year round village residents. The high cost of buying a lot in the village and building a building to start a business was seen as a major impediment to entrepreneurial efforts in town. With a short season to operate, it was felt this type of investment was unlikely to occur.

Lack of Expansion Space

It was noted that there are very few if any empty storefronts in the village during the summer months and those that might be available have high rents. This was seen as another impediment to the development of new business ventures in town.

Empty lots

The committee identified the empty lots that exist along Main Street as a significant issue. It was felt these empty spaces are an eyesore and give the village a desolate look. It was also noted that they are an unrealized resource that could add vitality to the village and provide space for potential entrepreneurs

and possibly additional village housing.

Other issues:

Other issues that were raised but did not fall within these identified themes included:

- The lack of year round employment
- The poor condition of buildings in the village, especially rental apartments. Some respondents felt that these building conditions "brought unsavory tenants into the village."
- The lack of year round restaurants, especially a casual coffee/tea shop where people can gather
- Shops and restaurants can't afford to stay open all year
- Few medical/dental offices or facilities in town

Top Projects or Actions:

The Village Center Plan Committee suggested a wide range of actions to improve Northeast Harbor's village

center, but several came up frequently and were generally agreed upon. Two of the more popular responses included: improving the appearance of Main Street and creating better connections between the harbor and Main Street.

Specific projects and actions identified by the Village Center Plan Committee included:

- Add housing in the village center, especially affordable housing and seasonal housing for summer workers
- Build sidewalks and parallel parking along Tracy Road
- Make better use of the parking lots behind the Great Harbor Maritime Museum. Use this area to expand the village commercial area
- Widen the sidewalks along Main Street and make them concrete or brick
- Utilize parallel parking on Main Street in the summer but keep it one-way.
- Find a different use for the old Firehouse building, possibly as a restaurant
- Put public seating areas along Main Street so people can linger there
- Put utility lines underground
- Expand the commercial zone down Sea Street and into the harbor
- Utilize the commercial zone along Tracy Road more effectively
- Put trees along Main Street
- Improve rental units along Main Street to attract higher income renters, possibly families
- Improve the landscaping along Main Street and in the marina area
- Create more progressive zoning which encourages the growth of seasonal businesses and housing opportunities
- Increase the number of child friendly facilities/enterprises in the village (bike racks, soda fountain, playgrounds)
- Utilize the marina more effectively to market the village
- Expand the commercial area to build more retail spaces and increase available services in the village
- Fill in the empty lots with new retail stores and housing

Primary Strengths and Assets:

Finally, the Village Center Plan Committee was asked to identify the primary strengths and assets of Northeast Harbor's village center. The most popular response centered around the compactness of the village and its safety, especially for kids on bikes and pedestrians. A full list of responses is listed below:

- The safety of the village, kids can bike into town
- The ability to walk into the village and down the street to shop
- A feeling of community awareness, a small town feel

- The simplicity and ease of access to shop
- The presence of community elders
- A high end clientele

Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan Public Outreach Meeting

On November 19, 2015 a community meeting was held from 6pm to 7:30pm at the Northeast Harbor Library. The purpose of this event was to allow residents the opportunity to communicate their issues, aspirations and priorities regarding Northeast Harbor's village center. The workshop centered on four key questions.

- What are the primary strengths and assets of Northeast Harbor's village center?
- What are five issues or concerns facing Northeast Harbor's village center?
- What are the three most important issues facing Northeast Harbor's village center?
- What are three specific projects or actions you would

like to see undertaken within the village center

The following is a summary of the thoughts, comments, and opinions received in response to these four questions. All discussions were held in small working groups of 8 to 10 residents, each moderated by a member of the Village Center Plan Committee.

Primary Strengths and Assets:

Participants were asked to identify the major strengths and assets of Northeast Harbor's village center. Popular responses focused on the friendly nature of the village, its historic charm, its compact size and its safety.

Specific strengths and assets identified by meeting participants are listed below, in their own words:

- People can find things
- Older buildings are attractive and charming

- The marina
- It has the charm of a New England village, it is not homogenized
- The library
- The Neighborhood House
- It's compact nature
- Easy to maneuver around
- Nice sense of community
- Not too much traffic
- Safe for kids
- Could provide all your needs in the summer months
- Post office (as an asset but also as a meeting place)
- Destination town
- Friendly town, you have people to talk to
- Plenty of parking
- Village is centrally located and adjacent to other town assets
- Has a blend of businesses and residences
- Familiarity down the generations of the physical nature of the village
- High quality school
- Town sewer and water
- Nursing Association

- Trails and hiking opportunities in the village
- Easy access to Acadia National Park and to the marina
- Banks and year round businesses such as the hardware store and market
- Medical office
- Nursery school
- Gas station (as an asset but also as a meeting place)
- Beautiful and safe walking town
- History of the village
- Great police, fire and town workers
- Churches

Top Five Issues:

Moderators began this discussion by asking participants to list the top five issues that confront the village of Northeast Harbor. While this question brought forth a wide variety of topics, many issues were interrelated and in agreement with the responses of other participants. For simplicity, the responses are grouped into common themes.

Lack of Affordable Housing and Population Decline

The lack of affordable housing for year round residents and for summer workers was seen as a significant issue for the overall health and vitality of the village. With spiraling real estate prices all over the island but especially within walking distance of the village, it was felt that many local residents have been forced to find housing outside this area. In addition, respondents felt this decline in year round residents severely affected the viability of shops and services located along Main Street.

It was also noted that in the summer, it is very difficult for businesses to find the workers they need because of a lack of affordable housing near the village. Since many of these workers lack a car and bus service to town is not frequent, living within walking distance to the village is a necessity.

No Gathering Places

Participants consistently mentioned the lack of any commercial venues in the village (especially year round options) where they could meet with friends. This was especially true during the winter months.

Participants felt this made the village feel desolate in the winter even with an active school, library and the Neighborhood House.

Inadequate Grocery Store

Meeting participants felt that the local grocery store could be an important community anchor and gathering spot for village residents, as well as an essential resource for the village, but that the current operation needs improvement and is too expensive for local people as well as some summer residents. It was further noted that the apartments above the grocery store were in poor repair and were not attracting the desired resident base.

Viability of Existing Businesses

Participants expressed significant concern about the continuing viability of many stores within the village center. A decreasing year round population, the lack of lodging and restaurants in the village, a short season and poor coverage by the Island Explorer bus were all mentioned as reasons for their concern. Participants also noted that few shops were affordable for middle class residents.

Other Issues:

The following are other issues and concerns raised by meeting participants that don't fit into the identified themes:

- No year round medical center
- Difficulty of communication between businesses and shoppers
- Weak shoulder seasons
- Restrictive zoning due to high residential values
- Poor connection between marina and Main Street

- Poor signage within the village
- Poor marketing of village assets (a village website is needed)
- No tax incentives
- Lack of parking
- Lack of colorful characters
- Lack of activity and businesses in which to shop
- Safety declining, people drive too fast
- Lack of arts/entertainment
- Too expensive to start a business
- Condition of roads
- Façade of buildings need repair/refurbishment
- Poor streetscaping along Main Street
- Poor communication about what is going on in town

Three Most Important Issues:

After all concerns and issues had been voiced, participants were asked to take everyone's comments into consideration and decide what three

issues or concerns were the most important. The top three issues identified were:

- The lack of restaurants
- The viability and lack of variety and number of businesses along Main Street
- The lack of affordable housing

Top Projects or Actions:

Workshop participants suggested a wide range of action items to improve Northeast Harbor's village center. The most popular response was to improve the appearance of Main Street by putting utilities underground, widening sidewalks, improving building facades, and by installing improved lighting, green space, landscaping and seating.

Other specific projects and actions provided by workshop participants are listed below, in their own words:

- Convert the old firehouse into a restaurant

- Get the town to create business incentives
- Undertake parking and sidewalk improvements along Tracy Road
- Promote village more effectively to attract cruise ship passengers and summer renters
- Fill empty lots along Main Street
- Create a marina shuttle to Main Street
- Provide grants to businesses to improve facades along Main Street
- More effectively utilize the parking lot by the old firehouse
- Create better communication between vendors and events
- Create affordable housing
- Create a paid position to move the town forward (Under the Chamber of Commerce?)
- Utilize existing resources within the village (Medical Center, the Neighborhood House, the Nursing Association) as a health

concept to attract residents of all ages

- Create destination offerings such as a skating rink
- Coordinate with marina activities more effectively and link it to the village center
- Create a non-profit organization to support economic development and growth
- Make zoning changes to allow businesses in the residential areas
- Attract businesses to town, especially restaurants
- Increase the commercial area in the village
- Create programs that will help sustain businesses, extend the season and bring more people into the village.
- Create a marina village to replace Kimball Terrace with restaurants, shops and lodging
- Increase island promotion activities

Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan Stakeholder Meeting

On February 3, 2016, a community stakeholder meeting was held from 5:30pm – 7pm at the Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor.

Individuals that either owned property or a business within the study area and people identified as key stakeholders in the planning process were invited to this event. The purpose of the meeting was to identify key assets and issues in the village study area and to solicit a vision for its future. This meeting was organized around small working groups of 4 to 6 participants, each staffed by one or more Village Center Plan Committee members.

The discussion centered around these three questions:

- What are the primary strengths and assets of Northeast Harbor's village center?
- What are the three most important issues facing Northeast Harbor's village center?
- What are three specific projects or actions you would like to see undertaken within the village center?

Primary Strengths and Assets:

Stakeholders were asked to identify the major strengths and assets of Northeast Harbor's village center. The most popular response was the village's charm and its compact nature. Being able to walk and bike to and around the village was an important asset to most stakeholders. Participants added that the character and small town feel of the village setting was very important

Other strengths and assets included:

- Friendly
- Offers comfortable gathering spots

- Safe
- People tend to look out for one another
- It still looks the same
- Relaxed pace in the fall, winter and spring
- Variety of good retail along Main Street
- Elderly friendly
- The Neighborhood House
- Can double park in front of the post office
- Shops with residences above them
- No chain stores
- Library nearby
- Every building has its own character
- Cohesive town events like the Memorial Day parade

Three Most Important Issues:

Participants were asked to list the three most important issues that currently confront Northeast Harbor's village center. The question solicited a wide variety of responses

but several general themes emerged. They included:

The Lack of Affordable Housing and a Declining Population

As at the general public meeting, stakeholder participants listed the lack of affordable housing in the village center as a significant issue. They noted there was a lack of winter rentals, a lack of people in the winter months and a desolate look from November through April.

The Need for More Activity Along Main Street

Participants voiced a strong desire for more summer and year round restaurants, shops, inns and entertainment options along Main Street. They noted that the empty lots detracted from the attractive nature of Main Street and if filled with new buildings could provide a venue for the development of the attractions listed above.

Need for a Variety of Businesses

Stakeholders pointed out a lack of variety in the business types located in the village center, highlighting the need for more affordable shops, more attractions to entice people to stay in town, a hair salon, and a B&B.

Other Issues:

Other issues that did not fall within these general categories included:

- Need more viable businesses
- A need for active parking along Main Street (15 minutes)
- Need for a year round one way traffic pattern on Main Street
- The need for a crosswalk on Main Street
- Need for a town level economic development director
- Need for more trash and recycling containers along Main Street
- A need to improve sidewalks

- A need to increase the amount of parking

Top Projects or Actions:

Participants suggested a wide range of action items to improve Northeast Harbor's village center. The more popular responses included:

Upgrading the visual appearance of Main Street by improving its built environment such as lighting, sidewalks, building facades, utility lines and landscaping; adding more restaurants and; increasing the amount of affordable housing.

Other projects or actions suggested by meeting participants included:

- Clean up ports so boaters come up and shop
- Put restaurants in the marina
- Add outdoor tables to restaurants along Main Street
- Don't allow buses in town
- Replace Maritime Museum with a restaurant
- Make the town a destination

- Require new construction within the village be winterized
- Keep businesses open Thursday – Saturday during the winter
- Create a town motto or brand
- Town should purchase the former Maison Suisse building and develop it into condos
- Create more services for retirees (mail delivery, transportation, restaurants)
- Create more handicapped parking along Main Street
- More effectively connect harbor and Main Street
- Create a walking tour of the village
- Create more parking

Summer Residents Association Meeting, Northeast Harbor

On July 16, 2015 at 4:30pm the Town of Mount Desert Summer Residents Association held its first summer meeting at the Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor. At this meeting early information about the upcoming Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan was provided and a short outreach session was conducted.

The discussion centered on two questions.

- What do you like best about the village of Northeast Harbor
- What would you like to see changed in the village

Village Assets:

Participants at this meeting were in agreement that the compactness, safety, deep sense of community and convenience of the village were its

primary assets. In addition, the boutiques along Main Street, the hardware store, McGrath's and the Asticou Inn nearby were seen as significant pluses for the community. Being able to bike around the village was also seen as an asset.

Desired Changes:

Suggestions for desired changes in the village were numerous and varied. They included:

- Putting utility wires underground, at least along Main Street
- The need for an alternative grocery store, one that is not so expensive
- Sidewalk improvements along Main Street
- The installation of more bike racks in the village center
- Repurposing the Kimball Terrace property to utilize the site more intensively
- Re-developing the Cranberry Island parking lot to a more intensive use
- Improvements to the walkway between the parking lot behind the Maritime Museum and the Cranberry Island Parking lot to make it more visible and available.
- Privatization of the harbor to make it more vibrant and interesting
- Adding a public swimming pool and restaurant in the marina area

Northeast Harbor Village Center Plan Outreach Questionnaire

An on-line, mailed and hand distributed questionnaire for town residents was distributed between December 2015 and February 14, 2016. It was designed to supplement in-person outreach activities and to provide a means for both summer and year round residents not currently present in town to voice their concerns about the village and ideas about its future.

As of the drafting of this Outreach Report, 90 residents submitted answers to the questionnaire. A summary of their responses to key questions is provided below.

Primary Strengths and Assets

Survey participants were asked what they thought were the primary strengths and assets of Northeast Harbor's village center. This was a relatively open question and more

than one answer was permitted. The top responses in order were:

- Variety and quality of the retail shops
- Its quaint, unspoiled atmosphere and charm
- Its safe and close harbor
- Its small, compact size. The ability to walk everywhere
- Its attractiveness
- Its quiet, friendly and safe nature
- A place to gather, the hub of village activity

Top Five Issues or Concerns

The questionnaire asked participants to list the top five issues or concerns facing Northeast Harbor's village center. The following list of responses represents the top answers received.

- Few places to eat, no year round options
- Short summer season, high seasonality of business cycle
- Very small year round population

- Vacant lots and empty shops
- Inadequate grocery store (quality and price)
- Inadequate parking in the summer
- Inadequate sidewalks
- Not enough trees or landscaping
- Business attraction and retention

Specific Projects or Actions

Residents were asked to name three specific projects or actions they would like to see undertaken within the village center. The top responses in order were:

- Add landscaping
- Increase year round business (especially affordable options)
- Add more restaurants (especially ones with outdoor seating)
- Increase and reorganize parking
- Create green space with seating

- Put utilities underground
- Improve internet
- Improve sidewalks
- Increase variety of shops

Recommended Improvements

Survey respondents were asked to identify the types of improvements they thought were necessary in Northeast Harbor village. The top responses were:

- Landscaping
- Benches and other street improvements
- Street and sidewalk repairs
- Put utilities underground
- Parking improvements
- New facades or storefronts

Parking

When respondents were asked to describe parking in Northeast Harbor during the summer months 41.1% of respondents rated it average while 40.0% rated it difficult.

Non-Residential Improvements

Participants were asked to list the kinds of non-residential development they would like to see in Northeast Harbor village. The top six types of commercial development that respondents would like to see more of are: restaurants (83.3%), retail (58.8%), personal services (48.8%), mixed/commercial/residential use (37.7%), professional offices (26.6%) and hotels, motels and B&B's (22.2%).

Plan Priorities

When asked what top three priorities the Northeast Harbor Village Plan should focus on, respondents listed the following actions:

- Attracting and retaining residents
- Business attraction/retention
- Commercial/shopping options
- Housing stock
- Streetscaping
- Sidewalk improvements

- Parking
- Entertainment options

Visions for the Future

When respondents were asked to describe their ideal vision of Northeast Harbor's village center in 2025 a wide variety of responses were received but the majority of respondents described a village with a bustling, viable year round community with restaurants, a mix of both year round and summer shops and stores, professional offices and apartments. They envisioned a village much like it is today but livelier and with an improved appearance and better parking.

Other descriptions included:

- Same quaint town but with a beautiful pedestrian promenade along Main Street, and a lively three to four season economic base. A place with jobs and housing
- Vacant lots built out, power lines underground, cleaner, wider sidewalks and

pathways, lights with flowers,
a small pocket park for
visitors to sit and relax

- A town supported by internet businesses which can provide good jobs so more people can live in and around the village
- The PTM/gas/museum area spruced up and repurposed and all vacant lots filled
- Better interaction between the harbor and Main Street
- A quaint, classic, pedestrian friendly village with good restaurants
- A village with a better grocery store and good restaurants and that are open all year
- A pretty town that attracts both summer and winter residents and visitors but is not a tourist trap
- A main Street lined with healthy, attractive shops and adequate parking
- An expansion of the village into the Marina area
- A village with better traffic circulation

- A village that feels thriving and prosperous, you visit and want to stay
- A village with more to do, not just places to shop
- Adaptive reuse with attractive store fronts
- A vibrant village with charm and personality
- A village with industrial uses such as Wallace and MCM moved elsewhere
- A village with sufficient year round population to support shops open all year and restaurants. No overhead wires, no vacant lots and a landscaped Main Street
- A colorful, lively village that attracts young, entrepreneurial families and has a wide range of amenities such as restaurants, broadband, affordable housing, a wide range of retail stores and services for year round and summer residents