

1996 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR SOUTHWEST HARBOR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the planning process, a great effort was made to solicit the views of the broadest possible spread of opinion among seasonal as well as year-round residents. Responses to the survey, which was sent to every property-owner, formed the basis for drawing-up a table which summarizes issues of public concern, policies to deal with each issue, and measures to implement each policy. The Comprehensive Plan Committee, which numbered nearly 40, thrashed-out the wording on this chart and sent it to all householders for comment. The outcome of all this debate has been embodied in the Comprehensive Plan, and it is reflected in the Future Land-Use Plan.

The other main ingredient was the work which went into the Inventory. This consists of 13 Chapters, each of which analyzes the current state of affairs in a different aspect of the Town. Every Chapter includes key findings. These findings were cross-referenced to the table described above. Thus, the final statement of issues, policies and implementation strategies, which forms the core of the Plan, was shaped not only by public opinion but by the key findings from each Chapter in the Inventory.

The Future Land-Use Plan

1. *Land Area.* It was found that most new buildings will be accommodated on existing vacant lots, by splitting existing developed lots, or by building an accessory dwelling on an existing residential lot. Only 40 - 50 acres of additional land are needed in the 10-year planning period to accommodate projected new development. The most favorable area for growth has been identified towards the northern end of Main Street, because of soil conditions and accessibility to public services, and because traffic generated here will not add to congestion in the Town center. Roughly 150 acres are available.
2. *Concerns about the current Ordinance.* Surveys have shown that citizens have concerns about the possible increased scale of individual buildings in the future, their distribution, and about anomalies and hardships imposed on landowners wanting to extend existing buildings under the present Ordinance. Some detailed revision of the zoning map and of the definitions and standards within the Ordinance are recommended in order to respond to these concerns.
3. *Land-Use Changes.* While there is general support for continuing the existing mixed-use system, it is proposed to draw distinctions amongst three different scales of non-residential use depending on the degree of impact that each would have on adjoining properties. Greater or lesser setbacks and buffering would be called for according to the scale of the proposed new development.
4. *Shoreland Zones.* The future land use plan includes minor changes

5. *The Harbor.* Restrictions on the introduction of non-fishing-related uses in the Commercial Fisheries/Maritime Activity Zones under the Ordinance adopted in 1988 have been successful in preserving the working character of the harbor. This meets with public support, and some changes are proposed to reinforce this. Similarly, the Maritime Zone is intended to protect existing and new recreational boating activities, including boat building. No zone around the Harbor allows development of multi-family buildings or hotels.
6. *Approaches to the Town.* Surveys show that townspeople are concerned that the Town should not permit "seasonal strip development" to accumulate on the approaches into the community. People want to maintain the unpretentious and small scale character of the Town, which is greatly appreciated by both residents and visitors. Therefore, it is proposed to put restrictions on development along the roads leading into town by limiting the number of curb cuts and signs, and requiring greater setbacks.
7. *Village Center.* Concern has been expressed over seasonal traffic congestion and inadequate parking in the central area. In addition, there is concern about the possibility that businesses wanting to expand will be driven to relocating in the outskirts, leaving empty premises in the village center. Changes are proposed so that the requirement for offstreet parking could be met in different ways; in addition, various street and sidewalk improvements are suggested.
8. *Road Corridor.* The plan also indicates the approximate alignment of a possible new road that would connect the far end of the Freeman Ridge Road to the Bass Harbor Road. A second stage of this proposal could be a southern continuation of the road. The purpose of the new road is to provide access to large areas of the town which are inaccessible from the public road system, and which may one day be needed for development. Secondly, such a road would provide an additional route to improve circulation, particularly in the event of an emergency that blocked Main Street. The definition of such a corridor now would forestall development which would make future acquisition of this land expensive or impossible.

The Inventory

1. *Population and Demographics.* The current year-round population of 1950 people is projected to grow to just over 2000, resulting in an increase of between 34 and 54 households. However, the summer population of nearly 4000 people may grow faster than this. Due to migration in and out, plus a trend towards smaller household size, there will be more building activity than the growth in population alone would suggest.
2. *The Economy.* Although unemployment at 5.2% is lower than the average for the State, it is particularly high among women in SWH. This is partly due to the extremely seasonal nature of their employment. The total numbers of employed persons, and the percentage employed per household, are both expected to increase. Currently, the largest numbers are employed in health, educational and professional services, followed by retail trade and boat-building.

3. *Marine Resources.* The Harbor supports commercial fisheries, recreational boating and boat-building. The value of fish landings plus wages from marine-related employment was approximately \$18.5 million in 1995. There is concern that non-marine related uses should not push out these activities from land around the harbor. There is concern about shortage of moorings, and about pollution from the town's sewage treatment plant, from private overboard discharge units, and from visiting boats.
4. *Existing Land-Use.* The area of the Town not within Acadia National Park is mostly zoned for mixed-use. Two-thirds has been developed, leaving some 1,500 acres so far undeveloped.

Mixed-use zoning is accompanied by restrictions designed to prevent new non-residential or multi-family developments from adversely affecting adjoining residential properties. Broadly, the restrictions include set-backs, limits on building size and height, and the planting of landscaped buffering. In general, this policy has been supported, but difficulties are encountered because often the existing situation is "non-conforming," it is not easy to define satisfactory buffering standards and it is even more difficult to enforce such requirements.

Heavy industry is not foreseen, but the boat-storage business is leaning towards the construction of very much larger buildings than have been seen in SWH before.

5. *Housing.* SWH contains 1266 dwelling-units: three-quarters of them are in year-round use and 84% are single-family houses. During the preceding 20 years, 36% of new houses were built for seasonal use. The existing supply of housing satisfies the State's criteria for affordability.

It is estimated that 40 - 50 new units will be built for year-round occupation and 80 units for seasonal use during the next ten years.

6. *Public Facilities and Community Services.* Several areas of the Town's public services are in need of major capital expenditure; namely, the water filtration plant, sewage collection system and treatment plant, firehouse and police station.

The cost of the school system, particularly of Pemetic Elementary School, has risen far more rapidly than that of other public services in recent years. The reasons for this are varied, but it has meant a reduction in the proportion of expenditure devoted to other public purposes.

The Town should consider possible economies of scale that might be achieved by combining more public services with adjoining towns, particularly Tremont.

7. *Transportation.* Summer traffic increased by 50% over the last 5 years and seems set to go on increasing. The Town should work with other Island Towns to encourage alternate forms of transportation within the Island.

Problems were identified as short-term summer traffic congestion in Main Street, speeding on Main Street, and lack of provision for pedestrians and for bicycles. There was also concern about emergency-vehicle egress, and about inadequate parking in the Village Center during summer months. Proposals are made for a seasonal traffic-light at the central intersection, a seasonal ban on parking on one side of Main Street, the construction of traffic-calming measures and of sidewalks in congested areas. There are also proposals for developing more off-street public parking areas near the center of town and for making better provision for bicycles.

8. *Recreation and Open Space.* SWH has ample recreational and open space.
9. *Natural Resources.* The survey gave ample evidence that the diversity of SWH's natural resources and scenic beauty are appreciated by residents and visitors alike. Protection of important scenic areas and critical wildlife habitat remains an important policy for the Town. Concern was expressed about the changing character of the approach to the Town down Carroll Hill as a result of new commercial development, large parking areas and minimal landscaping.
10. *Agricultural and Forestry Resources.* Some additional safeguards are needed against clearcutting outside the Shoreland Zone.
11. *Historical and Archaeological Resources.* Some effort is required by the town to help identify historic resources.
12. *Water, Soil and Topographical Resources.* Concern was expressed about soil and topo conditions likely to lead to excessive water runoff, and to possible pollution of groundwater supplies.
13. *Fiscal Capacity.* Only a modest increase is anticipated in population and in new businesses; therefore, there will be no great change in the tax base. Due to the decline (in real terms) of the State's subsidy, coupled with rising costs of public services, there has been an inevitable increase in property taxes. Total expenditure has increased by 30% over the last five years.

There is cause for serious concern because some public expenditures have been increasing far more rapidly than this, notably school costs by 68%, Police and Fire Departments by 72%, and Highway Department by 69%. One result is that 56% of the Town budget now goes to Schools as compared with 48% in 1990.

The Town is fiscally sound, in the sense that it has ample additional borrowing capacity. Legally, it can assume debt up to 15% of the its total assessed property value. Currently the Town's debt equals about 1% of its assessed value.