Access Is Key to Future Of Working Waterfront

BY AARON PORTER

WALPOLE — Without some education, planning, understanding and investment, Maine's working waterfronts are at risk. That was the message delivered to a crowd of 75 at the Working Waterfront Access Forum held last week at the University of Maine's Darling Marine Center.

The gathering, hosted by Maine Sea Grant, the State Planning Office, the Island Institute and the Gulf of Maine Foundation, pulled together interested and knowledgeable participants from the length of Maine's coast. Fishermen, yachtsmen, boatyard owners, fish farmers, real estate agents, ferry operators, harbor masters and kayak guides, among others, came to check the pulse of what seems to be an increasingly resonant concern.

Indeed, Governor John Baldacci gave an opening address in which he stated his administration's support for investment in working waterfronts and his belief that a mix of working and recreational uses will make Maine prosperous. Although he hasn't created a formal task force to look into the future of the working waterfront, as he has for aquaculture and groundfish in the state, Baldacci charged participants with creating a plan that could lead to some legislative action.

Once Baldacci had departed, the session focused on particulars and personal experiences preserving, losing or struggling with a lack of working waterfront.

State Sen. Dennis Damon (D-Hancock County), who was attending an Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission at the time, gave a video address in which he stated some of the most basic problems and risks regarding the working waterfront.

"If we don't realize what we've got and we don't do what we can to protect it, we're going to lose it," he said.

More specifically, "the key to maintaining our working waterfront is access," he added.

Through the course of the day, a laundry list of threats to waterfront access for commercial enterprise came from participants. Identified as some specific contributing threats were high property taxes, increasing tourism, changing fisheries, waterfront development and poor zoning.

Personal accounts from participants gave instances of efforts that preserved access and suggested other strategies and tools that could be used to preserve working water access.

Jim Barstow, who runs the Monhegan Boat Line, clearly stated the central issue of a lack of understanding about commercial waterfronts
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among the public.

"What I've seen from within
the industry is a lack of under-
standing," he said. The working
waterfront's biggest problem, he
said, "is having the public un-
derstand and accept us."

Education was frequently
raised as a first step to protect
working waterfronts. From
tourists who need to understand
the unique contributions the
smells, sounds and personalities
of the working dock make to their
experience of Maine, to educating
town administrators and planners
about the impacts some simple
zoning changes could have in pres-
serving a working pier in town.

Terry Sortwell, a real estate
agent from Camden, conceded
that it's part of an agent's job to
teach potential buyers about the
importance of the working harbor
to the economy and character of
Maine. "And that if that starts to
go away it's a pretty bland exis-
tence on the coast of Maine."

Kayak guide Paul Travis said
his industry, a relative new-
comer to the working waterfront,
needs to educate more tradi-
tional users about the place padd-
lers play there. He said the
guide also is responsible for edu-
cating paddlers about the other
industries with which they must
share the state waters and public
access points.

Beyond general public educa-
tion, there were more specific
strategies for saving working wa-
terfronts. From a town planner's
perspective, Bill Needleman of
the Portland Planning Office gave
a brief account of that city's suc-
cessful zoning efforts to preserve
its working piers and marine
businesses.

He said the effort started
when condominium development
threatened to displace much of
the commercial piers in the late
1980s. A moratorium on non-
marine development put a stop to it.
Needleman said the zoning code
that followed from the morato-
rium is complex but effective at
keeping the city's working water-
front intact.

"Government intervention is
justified and has a role to play," he
told the forum.

From a more cooperative per-
spective, Westport Island lob-
stermen Dana Faulkingham re-
counted the creation of a 21-
member lobstermen's co-op to
preserve a former boatyard as a
facility for working lobstermen to
land, keep their boats and sell
their catch. In spite of the high
cost of waterfront real estate, the
lobstermen were able to pool their
resources to provide an access to
preserve and simplify their business
needs collectively.

"It's different in every case.
It's different in every harbor," ob-
served Dana Rice, a Goulds-
boro lobster dealer and fisher-
man. But he warned that the in-
crease in waterfront property
values make it harder and
harder for fish dealers to main-
tain their presence on the water-
front. The taxes are high and the
temptation to "sell the property
and walk away" is strong he said.
However, he stressed that "it's
critical to preserve the infra-
structure of the dealer."

Rice and forum participant
Burr Taylor of Harpswell raised
concerns about the future of
Maine's groundfishery if the
docks and dealers and other fa-
cilities are gone by the time it
rebuids.

"Do we put a sign on it that
says, 'Waiting for future working
waterfront?'" Taylor asked.

Barstow responded that "the only
answer to saving the working wa-
terfront is buying real estate and
developing it as working waterfront."

But there were other sugges-
tions, such as a current use taxa-
tion plan that would allow work-
ing waterfront to be taxed at a
value commensurate with its
worth as a working pier not de-
veloped waterfront property.

Another example offered to the
forum came from York Harbor,
where just last month a lobster
pier, permitted for residential
development, was purchased by two
fishermen who then sold the de-
velopment rights for the property
to a local land trust.

Joey Donnelly Jr. of the York
Harbor Board explained that the
purchase easement allowed the
fishermen to consider purchasing
the property with an asking price
of $800,000. Drafting the easement
language was very complicated,
Donnelly said. In effect, it allows

the young lobstermen to continue
fishing from the dock. But it pro-
hibits any development or marina-
type activities on the property.

Jim Conners of the State Plan-
ing Office's Maine Coastal Pro-
gram called the easement a "landmark
deal," involving land
trusts in conservation of working water-
fronts.

While many of the accounts
were of successes, a sense of ur-
gency pervaded the gathering.
During the lunch break, night-
marish stories of waterfront prop-
erties recently sold for millions
and new homeowners objecting to
the authorities about lobsterboat
traffic waking them in the morn-
ing, abounded.

Looking at real estate pres-
ures up and down the coast,
Sortwell stressed that some
protection lies in the hands of
communities.

"In my opinion preserving
commercial designation can be
addressed in local ordinances
prohibiting change to residen-
tial use," he said.

However there were few ac-
counts of such steps being taken
by local governments when de-
velopment pressures get high.

"If the balance has already
shifted too far, the coast may be-
come, in the end, a simply resi-
dential community," warned
Sortwell, as he explained the
influence an influx of new residents
who don't understand working wa-
terfronts could have on the coast.

Numerous cautionary accounts
of what's happened in the western
part of the state were available
for participants from Downeast
where the development pressures
are somewhat mild still.

One account came from Susan
Swanton, director of the Maine
Marine Trades Association.

"There isn't a single guy who
fishes out of Biddeford Pool who
lives in Biddeford Pool," said
Swanton as she recounted the
changes that the real estate boom
brought to her home.
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