

Wiscasset, Maine Downtown Plan



May 17, 2011

Introduction

For many years, Wiscasset has made significant planning efforts towards revitalizing its historic downtown village and working waterfront. Several reports and planning documents have been created although the reports and plans resulting from these efforts were created independent of each other, there are similar recommendations consistently found in each. The planning process includes the reports and plans, and created goals, policies and strategies to outline an implementation guideline for a comprehensive downtown plan. The major conclusions that support a downtown revitalization plan include the following:

- **Develop tourism, industry, business, homes and services while protecting the historic character of the Town. To do this, the Town must launch a redevelopment process with a goal to make the central village and waterfront a tourist magnet and a major driver of the tourist sector of the Town's economy.**
 1. **Establish intermodal transportation links- cruise, tour/ferry, boat docks, passenger rail station, and bus stop.**
 2. **Increase parking on Railroad Avenue- expand the ability availability of parking. This is critical to the success of the downtown revitalization plan due to the need for improved accessibility to the downtown.**
 3. **Passenger rail service- construct a passenger rail station north of Railroad Avenue (identified as preferred site).**
- **Preserve the historic nature of the village, both in terms of individual structures and overall ambience, and enhance its role as a service and cultural center for the region's residents and make it a destination for visitors.**
 1. **Market the village as a visitor destination point- emphasize existing village clusters (e.g. antiques, galleries, B&B's) and on regional touring themes (e.g. museum in the streets, antiquing).**
- **Promote and protect the availability of outdoor recreational opportunities for the Town residents and visitors.**
 1. **Bike/Pedestrian Trail- encourage the development of recreational facilities to meet needs of residents and visitors.**
 2. **Develop an economic impact study of the waterfront activities.**

These conclusions have the most strongly supported themes in public surveys and have received approval from the Board of Selectmen and the Town voters, primarily through the adoption of the comprehensive plan. In fact, there is consistent mention of a renewed focus on the waterfront as a driver of the Town's economy. Plus, the downtown is identified as a designated growth area in the comprehensive plan. What the Town needs is a project that will prove to be the catalyst for downtown revitalization efforts. Through projects that will improve access, such as new parking, economic development opportunities will arise because the downtown will become more accessible.

Historic Wiscasset Overview

Earle Shettleworth, Director of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, cites Wiscasset as one of three architecturally significant villages in the state, along with the towns of Paris Hill and Castine. Samuel Chamberlain, in his book *Towns of New England*, chose Wiscasset to represent the State of Maine. He noted that millions were spent restoring Williamsburg, while Wiscasset remains essentially intact.

Today, its abundance of classical architecture is evidenced by the inclusion of 10 structures in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of 1936 and the subsequent inclusion of five buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings. In 1973, a large part of the Village/Historic District became a part of the National Register. In fact, much of the downtown area is a living field museum – and we hold the keys to its future.

The first recorded settlement at Wiscasset was in 1660 by George and John Davie. By 1740, there were 30 families at Wiscasset Point, numbering about 150 people. Wiscasset Point was one of three parishes incorporated in Pownalborough in 1760. It took the name of Wiscasset in 1802.

As Wiscasset prospered as a deep-harbor shipping port during the late 18th and 19th century, grander homes were built beyond the initial simple, smaller homes closer to the harbor. These include the Nickels-Sortwell House, the Wood-Foote House and the Governor Smith House. Other structures of note are the elegant brick courthouse, which is home to the longest continuously operating courthouse in the country; the Old Jail, in operation until the 1950s; the Wiscasset Library; the Town Common; the Sunken Garden; the Ancient Cemetery, and much more.

By the end of the Revolution to the Embargo of 1807, Wiscasset had no equal in any part of Maine as the chief shipping port east of Boston. It was a very prosperous era with so many ships registered here, that it was said you could walk from deck to deck all the way across the harbor and masts were everywhere the eye could see.

The Embargo, intended to prevent war with England, failed and Wiscasset fortunes declined from that time, as shipping dried up and creditors loomed. Now we find ourselves, generations later, again seeking new fortunes and new avenues for our community to prosper. And, as surveys have shown a number of times, the majority of townspeople consider Wiscasset's venerable history as unique and something to be proud of – and something to preserve for those that will follow after us.

This same majority understand that our historic landscape and heritage is as valuable an asset as are our schools; our still protected, deep-harbor working waterfront; our developing airport; the advent of air/rail/ferry travel with a stop in Wiscasset; and the development potential at both the Mason Station and the Maine Yankee site.

In conclusion, it would be shortsighted at best to discount the economic value of a preserved, nurtured "field museum" here in our care. Thousands of tourists stop in Wiscasset each year, through at least three seasons of the year. They used to come to see the Old Ships – we failed to preserve those. Now we have a chance to step up to the plate again - this time to preserve a greater prize – our overall historic heritage, proud and unique.

Setting and Key Issues

Setting

Wiscasset's waterfront is special and any discussion of the downtown village would not be complete without inclusion of the waterfront. Located on the Sheepscot River, approximately 14 miles inland from the ocean, few communities can boast of a deep water, working waterfront which has maintained areas of productive wildlife habitat, abundant natural and architectural beauty, and numerous historic sites. The downtown village and waterfront offers a variety of economic, scenic and recreational opportunities to visitors and residents.

The downtown village and waterfront supports an active commercial fishing trade from the Town landing, as well as opportunities for recreational boating and fishing. Spectacular views of the Sheepscot and Back Rivers and the downtown village exist from several vantage points along the waterfront. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the downtown village is the central hub of activity along the waterfront. Historically, this has served as the center for economic activity and expresses the historic, intimate and pedestrian charm of a small coastal community that Wiscasset is known for.

Over the years, the importance of Wiscasset as an economic center has steadily declined, while the interest in the quality of life within the town as a residential community has grown. The increase in the number of people wishing to visit or reside in Wiscasset has brought pressure on the town's ability to properly support the activities that draw people to the community. Also, the loss of Maine Yankee significantly impacted the tax base with a shift from a majority of tax dollars from commercial uses to residential. The town is now undergoing a revitalization process as we seek to retain and improve our vital economic role. The downtown village and waterfront remains one of the gems of Maine, as a place to live, work and visit. Maintaining its historic character is essential, while revitalizing its economic role in the region.

Key Issues

The comprehensive plan gives explicit guidance about the kind of attention the townspeople would like given to their downtown village and waterfront. The important issues facing the downtown village and waterfront are those which threaten its economic vitality, easy access to the water, historical image, and visual character. The following is a brief description of the key issues as identified through plans and reports.

Pedestrian

- Gaps in the sidewalk system, notably from Lee-High Street intersection to Water Street and along most of Bath Road. Poorly articulated pedestrian circulation routes, especially across Bath Road, hinder the movement of pedestrians and vehicles.
- The lack of public property in some areas restricts public access to the waterfront. This also proves to be a problem for a connected waterfront.
- Many of the sites that provide access to the waterfront are auto-oriented and not inviting to the pedestrian.

- Lack of a meaningful connection between two of the primary waterfront facilities, the town landing and the Creamery Pier. Currently, visitors and townspeople must either walk along the unimproved footpath or use a circuitous and longer route up Water Street.
- The physical separation of the waterfront by an active railroad right-of-way. State law prohibits pedestrians from walking on the railroad tracks so those wishing to walk along the shore must use an unimproved, overgrown dirt footpath between the high water line and the railroad tracks.



Vehicular

- Circulation conflicts with the railroad will periodically impede vehicular access.
- Lack of parking inhibits vehicular access for waterfront users, historical visitors and business patrons.
- Seasonal increase in the number and type of vehicles creates competition for limited parking spaces; therefore, limiting downtown village and waterfront foot traffic.
- Inefficient circulation patterns by people from out of town looking for parking adds to the congestion of village side streets.
- Seasonal traffic on Bath Road impedes attempts to cross this traffic corridor.

Parking

- Lack of adequate parking does not support the full use of available square footage of office/service/retail space.
- Fluctuation in demand creates the seasonal lack of adequate number of parking spaces, particularly in the waterfront area.
- The inefficient layout of existing parking lots contributes to the inadequate number of parking spaces.
- Appropriate signage to efficiently direct drivers to existing parking is lacking.
- Lack of dedicated parking space for boat trailers, buses and rail users creates a shortage of parking spaces for cars.

Economic

- Lack of parking impacts use of downtown village businesses by visitors and townspeople. Also, inadequate parking does not support the full use of available office/service/retail space; therefore, buildings are not realizing their full potential which increases the risk of deterioration.
- Lack of parking impacts people's ability to use and explore Wiscasset's natural and historic assets which significantly contribute to the town's economic well-being.
- The inefficient placement and overall lack of public restrooms negatively impacts people's use and enjoyment of the downtown village and waterfront.
- Existing town waterfront zoning ordinances threaten development of the downtown village and waterfront.

Visual Quality

- The town wishes to protect the impression of a small New England coastal town of predominantly 18th and 19th century architecture.
- Deterioration, modification or removal of existing historic structures, remnants and historic sites could diminish historic and visual character.
- The town lacks ordinances that protect historic landmarks and structures.
- Allowing continued indiscriminate public access into sensitive habitat areas by hikers and/or motorized vehicles will impact the habitat quality and potentially degrade visual integrity of the area.
- Physical improvements to the downtown village should be tastefully done so it enhances the historic quality of this area and its buildings.

A Downtown Village Concept

The downtown plan is consolidation of several reports and planning documents that provide a direction for downtown village and waterfront improvements. The Downtown Village Concept is developed to ensure that proposed developed conforms to an overall strategy for planning, improving and managing the downtown village and waterfront. It responds to selected issues and opportunities identified in town reports and planning documents, primarily those associated with access improvements. The following describes goals recommended to plan, improve and manage the above-mentioned area.



Accessible Downtown

For purposes of this plan, creating an accessible downtown appears to be one of the primary mechanisms that would be a catalyst for the downtown village and waterfront redevelopment. Several barriers have been identified as restricting public access, enjoyment and use of the downtown businesses. Some of these barriers have existed for many years. Changes in use and the increase in demand for waterfront access have created seasonal barriers as well. Such barriers can be reduced or eliminated either through new development, modifications or better management. Funding can be achieved through applying for private, state and federal grants. The following goals are recommended to improve enjoyment of and access to the downtown village and waterfront:

Pedestrian/Recreation

- **Develop pedestrian access in areas north and south of the downtown village. This will enable the continuation of links beyond the downtown village.**
- **Encourage public access to shoreline areas in the development of park and recreational opportunities. Specifically, a new handicap accessible walkway should be constructed along the waterfront to create a meaningful connection between the town landing and the Creamery Pier.**
- **Create a brochure outlining all recreational facilities available for public access.**
- **Negotiate with landowners to build a pedestrian bridge to White's Island and Birch Point.**
- **Create a new Bath Road crosswalk to connect the municipal building with the county courthouse.**
- **Create a sidewalk on the south side of Tucker's Hill and fore street to connect the Lee and High Street sidewalks, the new Birch Point Bridge (if built), the Middle Street Sidewalk, and the Water Street sidewalk.**
- **Build a sidewalk on the west side of Bath Road connecting the Lee Street sidewalk, the municipal building, the Gardiner road sidewalk, and the Washington Street sidewalk.**
- **Develop a comprehensive recreation plan that includes, but is not limited to existing facilities, regional involvement, town-owned land, and an inventory of needs that could include waterfront activities, historic preservation tours, special use facilities (e.g. skate parks), trails, funding mechanisms, construction, maintenance, and operations.**
- **Construct public restrooms with a potable water that have more direct access to business along Bath Road and Water Street.**

Transportation/Parking

- **Encourage intermodal transportation links- cruise, tour/ferry boat dock, passenger rail/bus station. Encourage the State to bring passenger rail service to Wiscasset.**
- **Expand the availability of parking by negotiating with private property and businesses to use lots in peak tourist season.**
- **Negotiate with the State of Maine to construct a parking area, railroad and bus station in the Joppa Cove area (North of Railroad Avenue, South of the wastewater treatment facility).**
- **Attract small cruise ships to Wiscasset by initiating a marketing effort to those companies that operate in the New England/Canada range.**
- **Map existing public parking spaces and lots and publish a handout showing it.**

- Improve the Memorial Pier to accommodate small cruise ships.
- Upgrade existing parking facilities through a clearly defined organization as part of an overall parking plan.
- Reconstruct and reconfigure Railroad Avenue to improve access and accommodate for vehicles, semi-tractor trailer delivery trucks and tour busses. Provide a pedestrian pathway along the entire access drive. Continuation of the use of Railroad Avenue by adjacent business For parking and deliveries should be addressed in final plans.

Historic/Visual Quality

- Create a program, such as museum in the streets, which will promote Wiscasset's historic assets.
- Explore the interest in local participation in the tax reimbursement program for expenditures related to preserving historic and scenic views.
- Launch an educational program that will inform townspeople and visitors about Wiscasset's unique historic and maritime heritage. Sponsor a project to prepare a narrative description of each historic building, why it's historic and what are its unique architectural features.
- Adopt a Historic Preservation Ordinance and use it to market the downtown village as a visitor destination.
- Adopt appropriate ordinances that will ensure the compatibility of new construction with the maritime, historic, cultural, and small business character of the downtown village and waterfront. Ensure that ordinances provide standards that promote a thriving downtown village and waterfront, allowing a mixed-use concept with more diversity of businesses and a strong working waterfront, serving townspeople, workers and visitors.
- Through an organized process, identify, document and prioritize the scenic features and views the townspeople and visitors value. After scenic features and views have been identified, strategies should be enacted for promoting and protecting these areas.
- Develop an economic impact study of the waterfront activities.



Wiscasset Downtown Defined

As previously stated, Wiscasset's waterfront is special and any discussion of the downtown village would not be complete without inclusion of the waterfront; therefore, the waterfront is included with the Downtown Plan. For the purpose of this Downtown Plan, the downtown village and waterfront is specifically identified on the map titled "Downtown Village and Waterfront" attached to this plan.

Partners

The following is a list of potential public and private organizations and people who could assist the town towards achieving its downtown village goals:

Wiscasset Board of Selectmen
Wiscasset Planning Board
Wiscasset Conservation Commission
Wiscasset Waterfront Committee
Wiscasset Area Chamber of Commerce
Commercial Fishermen
Recreational Water Users
Downtown Village Residents and Businesses
Maine Department of Transportation
Maine Department of Community and Economic Development
Lincoln County Historic Society

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