

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 recre-

ational 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.

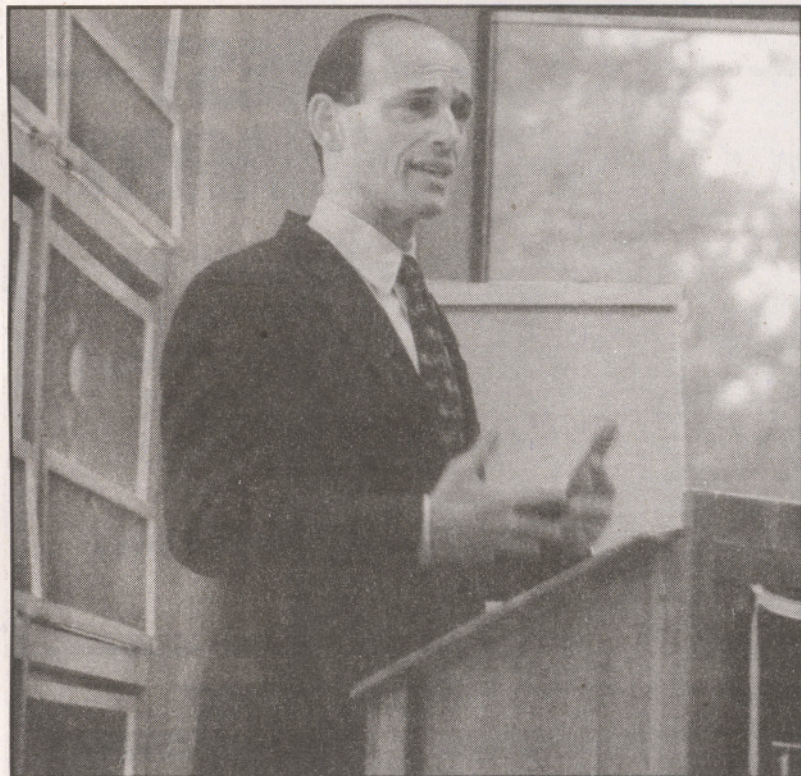
"If we don't realize what we've got and we don't do what we can to protect it, we're going to lose it," he said.

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 enterprises 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



STAFF PHOTO BY AARON PORTER

Governor John Baldacci furrows his brow as he addresses concerns about working waterfront access in the state.

Continued on Page 6

Working Waterfront In Peril

Continued from Page 5

among the public.

"What I've seen from within the industry is a lack of understanding," he said. The working waterfront's biggest problem, he said, "is having the public understand 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 a working dock make to their experience of Maine, to educating town administrators and planners about the impacts some simple zoning changes could have in preserving 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 existence on the coast of Maine."

Kayak guide Paul Travis said his industry, a relative newcomer to the working waterfront, needs to educate more traditional users about the place paddlers play there. He said the guide also is responsible for educating paddlers about the other industries with which they must share the state waters and public access points.

Beyond general public education, there were more specific strategies for saving working waterfronts. From a town planner's perspective, Bill Needleman of the Portland Planning Office gave a brief account of that city's successful 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 moratorium is complex but effective at keeping the city's working waterfront intact.

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

From a more cooperative perspective, Westport Island lobstermen Dana Faulkingham recounted 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 preserve commercial access and simplify their business needs collectively.

"It's different in every case. It's different in every harbor," observed Dana Rice, a Gouldsboro lobster dealer and fisherman. But he warned that the increase in waterfront property values make it harder and harder for fish dealers to maintain their presence on the waterfront. 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 infrastructure 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 facilities are gone by the time it rebuilds.

"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 waterfront is buying real estate and developing it as working waterfront."

But there were other suggestions, such as a current use taxation plan that would allow working waterfront to be taxed at a value commensurate with its worth as a working pier not developed 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 development rights for the property to a local land trust.

Joey Donnelly Jr. of the York Harbor Board explained that the purchased 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 prohibits any development or marina-type activities on the property.

Jim Connors of the State Planning Office's Maine Coastal Program called the easement a "landmark deal," involving land trusts in conservation of working waterfronts.

While many of the accounts were of successes, a sense of urgency pervaded the gathering. During the lunch break, nightmarish stories of waterfront properties recently sold for millions and new homeowners objecting to the authorities about lobsterboat traffic waking them in the morning, abounded.

Looking at real estate pressures 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 accounts of such steps being taken by local governments when development pressures get high.

"If the balance has already shifted too far, the coast may become, in the end, a simply residential community," warned Sortwell, as he explained the influence an influx of new residents who don't understand working waterfronts 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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