

Protection of working waterfront a priority

by Jennifer Brockway

SOUTH BRISTOL — A flooding tide of change is eroding Maine's coastal communities and threatening the working waterfront.

Stemming that tide of changing values and conflicting uses was the subject of a day-long conference on Dec. 17.

"We all have an interest in preserving the working waterfront. We need to balance the needs of all in the community seeking access to this vital infrastructure," Governor John Baldacci told the more than 50 industry representatives, lawmakers and municipal officials gathered for the forum.

From boatyards to marinas, commercial fishing to sea kayaking, the maritime trades that comprise the working waterfront are a vital component of the state's economy. The fishing industry alone had an \$860 million economic impact in 2001.

Yet according to the State Planning Office, only 25 miles of Maine's more than 7,000 miles of coastline are working waterfronts. The number continues to shrink, as commercial waterfront properties are converted to private residential development.

Adding to the problem is the commercial fishing industry's heavy reliance on access via private property. As those properties change hands, that traditional access is increasingly denied. A recent study by Coastal Enterprises Institute found the problem to be most acute in southern and Midcoast Maine. Rising coastal property taxes and industry regulatory burdens are further putting the squeeze on the working waterfront. Those who work the sea can no longer afford to live in the coastal communities.

Towns must weigh the economic importance of a healthy fishing community against the property tax revenue of new residential development, said Birch Harbor fisherman Dana Rice.

"Individuals can instead invest a couple of dollars to keep the fishing industry going and maintain a healthy community, and the savings will be phenomenal," he said.

Belfast Harbormaster Katherine Messier agreed that communities must identify what they want from their waterfronts.

"Harbor diversity, including fishermen and recreational users, is really important for a healthy harbor," she said. "Personally, I think using the water to its best potential is a working waterfront, and those uses to me are mostly related to fishing."

Diversity will be an important part of any solution, from tax-relief programs to nontraditional partnerships. One solution under investigation is the extension of current use taxation for water-dependent businesses, similar to the current system for reduced taxes for properties enrolled in the state's open space and tree growth programs. A land bank program is also being discussed at the state level.

Chris Spruce of the Sunrise County Economic Council says the best hope may be public investment in municipal access.

"We should be sure all our public facilities are kept in place and maintained at a level allowing their intended use," said Mr. Spruce.

Private investment programs, such as CEI's waterfront loan program, are also vital to improving access at private piers and wharves, said Mr. Spruce.

In the town of York, a private wharf will forever be used for commercial fishing thanks to a historic partnership between two fishermen, the York Land Trust and private funders, including CEI. Greater involvement by land trusts, improved ordinances and comprehensive plans and concerted public education also are in the mix at the forum, which moderator Ted Hoskins of the Maine Sea Coast Missionary Society called "the beginning of a long conversation."

More forums are planned, in conjunction with the statewide Working Waterfront Coalition.

"Ultimately, we as a state have to have an understanding of who we are and why we are," said Jim Barstow of Monhegan Boat Line. ■

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