

Maine's Changing Beaches: PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

Speakers:

Ron Owens, Scarborough Town Manager
Jim Thomas – Old Orchard Beach Town Manager
John Bubier – Biddeford City Manager

Economic Development, Tourism and Maine Beaches – Can They Co-exist? By Jim Thomas

Dealing with Beach as an entity

Old Orchard Beach History

1820 – First hotel, Parson Fairfield House

1874 – Railroad arrived, tourism blossomed

1907 – Disastrous fire – ended Grand Hotel Era

Current year round population: 9,500

Tourist Season: up to 100,000 per day

Tourism = focus of Old Orchard Beach economy

June-August municipal staff does morning beach clean up duty. Municipal costs associated with tourism equal \$1.4 million for police, fire, wastewater, water, beach maintenance, lifeguards, etc. Eighty percent of the municipal tax revenue is from residential sources, twenty percent from commercial. There are 2,800 campsites in town

Other possible sources for funding include a local option sales tax, but this would need legislative approval. Economic development goals include partnerships, curb appeal, and façade improvements. New redevelopment has resulted in increased assessed values and tax generation. Grand Victorian development as an example. The structure has been elevated 3' above dune for flood and storm protection and to meet the requirements of the Natural Resources Protection Act.

John Bubier

Coastal communities have one thing in common: Waterfront. Development impacts the value and utility of the waterfront. Approach applied in Biddeford: 1. identify the problem; 2. discuss the options; 3. implement solutions.

Biddeford economy overview:

Exit 32 is zoned for large box stores. Downtown has 2 million square feet of former mill space available with potential for \$400 million tax assessment valuation. Hills Beach/Biddeford Pool area has 39% of town's valuation at \$1 billion.

Water quality overview:

In coastal areas wastewater systems have been surveyed on 185 properties. Campgrounds are now in compliance. The City worked on 8 septic systems on Basket Island. Formerly point source pollution was the issue, now it is non-point pollution from street runoff, waste dumping at marinas, and agricultural outputs from animal wastes. The City offered to install a pumpout station at a marina, but the offer was declined by the facility. Reasonable costs are needed for wastewater disposal technology on islands where soils are poor or non-existent. Maine Healthy Beaches volunteer monitors are trained and active, but there are high turnover rates. They test at 7 locations throughout the summer and post warnings when needed. Regulatory agency cooperation is increasing as of late.

Coastal access for the public is a challenge. Access points to beaches are shrinking at Hills Beach and Biddeford Pool and seem to be subject to abutting owners' whims.

QUESTION SESSION

What's the deal with the local option sales tax?

Old Orchard Beach officials support it. It was first discussed in 1991 by Greater Portland Council of Governments. Town's control is limited to property tax unless State Legislature gives Town authority to control a local sales tax– i.e. portion of sales tax could be used to promote healthy beaches. Jim Thomas commented that while in San Diego he paid the \$35 'room tax' (local tax) and it was not an issue but the Maine Legislature thinks it would drive tourists away. In Old Orchard Beach a 5% tax would generate \$1 million annually

How about charging beachgoers \$1/head?

This is NOT a popular option, because controlling access would be a problem. Some communities charge for parking instead. Additional local sales tax would be more predictable, reliable.

Do the OOB 'beach cleaners' protect the dune grass? Jim Thomas explained that the Town is sensitive to the needs of plovers and other species using the dune grass.