

# SOUTHWEST HARBOR COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 2010

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## **Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION** to the Southwest Harbor 2010 Comprehensive Plan

What is a Comprehensive Plan? Your answer depends on your point of view. A successful Comprehensive Plan is a policy statement and a planning tool reflecting the consensus of the general public. It can help manage anticipated future growth by providing guiding principles for the town's Land Use Ordinance. It is an important factor in receiving state and federal grants for much-needed infrastructure improvements. It provides a snapshot of what the town is like now and expresses a collective vision of what the town's residents want their town to be in 10 or more years. It illuminates important current issues and recommends actions the town could take to resolve them.

While the Plan is not binding in the manner of the Land Use and Zoning Ordinance, it does provide an underpinning and a justification for the specific requirements, restrictions and limitations that the Ordinance describes. Implementing the plan depends on future decisions and actions by town boards, committees and staff. It is our collective voice, saying what we like about Southwest Harbor, what we hope to preserve, and what we might change to make community life better.

Information in the Appendices tells us where we are now – a “State of the Town” with respect to many different aspects of the community and its function. We have collected this information from a wide variety of sources - from the U.S. census and state-compiled information, from individual interviews with townspeople and town employees, from printed documents and maps, and from the internet. Where we thought “official” information was questionable, we have provided estimates based on talking with knowledgeable local sources, and we have indicated these estimates when we use them.

Important issues which need addressing in the near future as part of the plan are described in Chapter 5, along with the Policies that should guide the Recommendations for Action. In most instances, we make suggestions about who should be responsible for considering each recommendation and what a reasonable time frame might be. We want to emphasize that the decisions about what actions to take, if any, rest with town boards, committees and staff or with the voters, depending on who is authorized to make a specific decision or take a specific action.

Current land use patterns and the Future Land Use plan are discussed in Chapter 6. Southwest Harbor (along with Tremont) is unique in Maine because of its mixed-use zoning, which does not segregate commercial or industrial land uses from residential ones. Our work and talk with residents suggests that townspeople like it this way, although some might consider a few tweaks here and there to make it easier to live together harmoniously. All in all, this Plan does not propose major change. Those of us who have worked on this Plan hope that in hindsight it will have proved useful in protecting what we love about our town and in helping to keep it a vital year-round coastal community.

## **Chapter 2. VISION STATEMENT for Southwest Harbor**

A Comprehensive Plan begins with understanding current conditions and trends, and then analyzes them and proposes directions for the future. Those proposals rest on the community's vision for how it sees itself now and in the future. This vision shapes the Plan. From our work and public input over the last few years, this is what the Comprehensive Plan Committee understands to be the vision of our town's residents for its future – a community not so very different from the one we currently live in. It is upon this vision that our plan and its recommendations will rest.

### ***Vision Statement***

*When we picture SWH in 2030, this is what we hope it will be like:*

Southwest Harbor is a vibrant, small year-round community with a healthy local economy characterized by individual initiative and entrepreneurship. Marine services, fishing, boat building, recreational boating, and tourism continue to be important sources of employment and income. Many people are self-employed. The town continues to be a diverse mix of people of different ages and backgrounds who choose to live here, year-round or seasonally, and who are active participants in community life and town affairs. Residents continue to place a high value on good education while finding innovative ways to make it affordable. The cost and administration of some other essential public services are shared with neighboring communities and may continue to be led by private non-profit local organizations, such as the library and the ambulance service. Quality of place, rooted in our harbor, Acadia National Park, and our history, is maintained and enhanced by thoughtful development that maintains the modest, small-town look and feel while protecting our water supplies, wildlife, views, and traditional public access to the outdoors. Roads, bike lanes, sidewalks, and paths are in place and make walking and biking safe for residents and tourists. Innovation and initiative have made Southwest Harbor a more unified and sustainable community for all.

### Chapter 3.0 A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOUTHWEST HARBOR

The first European settlement on Mt. Desert Island was by Jesuits who landed on Fernald Point at the mouth of Somes Sound in Southwest Harbor. The settlement failed a few weeks later when it was discovered and destroyed by the English.

Dominion of the Maine coast by the English was finally established after the Battle of Quebec. In 1762 Francis Bernard, the last English governor of Massachusetts, traveled to Southwest Harbor and began surveying the lands surrounding the harbor. Two years later a more extensive survey was made with a plan for a proposed town and many of the original lot lines and boundaries remain extant today.

Following is a description of Southwest Harbor's very first land use plan from the papers of Sir Francis Bernard, "*Proposals for settling a Town in Mount desert, in the West Harbour there, being a most convenient Spot for a fishery.*"

*The Plan of the Town which is laid out in that Island is calculated for trade & business; for which its situation, being in the direct course of all the Vessels coasting along the Shore, & the great plenty of fish which will afford a staple commodity, make it Very suitable. The Lots of settlers are therefore laid out with 4 acres each, upon which each settler will be obliged to build an house & settle a family. The rest of the lands given for the incouragement of settlers will be in the outlots as nearly accommodated to the Town as can be. Each settler of a family is to have 25 acres given to him free of all expense. This alone will afford sufficient land for husbandry as it is supposed much the greater part of the settler will apply themselves to fishing & trades, for which their home lots alone will be abundantly sufficient. But if Any families which make husbandry their business shall want more lands, they shall be supplied as far [as] 25 acres each a dollar an acre. The duties required of settlers are that they settle a family upon the home lot, building an house within a year & clearing the home lot within 3 years. Mines of Metall or Coals and Quarries of lime stone will be reserved to the proprietor & also timber trees upon lands unleased.*

Early settlement of the land was by fishermen and lumbermen and originally this Town of Mt. Desert included several off shore islands. In 1796 Eden (now Bar Harbor) was formed. The Town of Mansel (later called Tremont) was incorporated in 1848. The Town of Southwest Harbor further divided itself from Tremont in 1905 over a dispute about whether to build a new school. The Town Charter describing the new town's boundaries also discusses the disposition of certain properties such as fire fighting equipment and of certain responsibilities such as support of paupers.

The first church on Mt. Desert Island was established in Southwest Harbor in 1792.

Because Southwest Harbor was an exporter of lumber and fish, boatbuilding grew to be an important part of the economy, though today most of the boats built are for recreation and pleasure. In its time, Southwest Harbor has had a lobster cannery and more recently a sardine cannery, though both have long since closed.

Southwest Harbor was “the first destination on the Island for summer visitors in the years after the Civil War, and since then has had a double personality. Before the war it was a long established fishing, trading, ship building, lumbering and agricultural village. It then became the seasonal home for a considerable population of upper middle class and affluent summer residents. The first summer visitors boarded with local families, who then became entrepreneurs, building the first summer boarding hotels”\* including the very first on Mount Desert Island, the Island House built by Deacon Henry H. Clark during the Civil War. The Island House followed by others, pre-dates the era of the great hotels of the 1870’s. Throughout the 70’s and the “Gilded Age”, Southwest Harbor with its steamship landing at Clark’s Point was a destination for “rusticators” who travelled from Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and other points south and west. The steamboat landing built by the same Deacon Clark in the 1850’s was for many years the only one on Mount Desert Island. The only hotel now remaining, The Claremont Hotel on Somes Sound, was built in 1884 and continues the long tradition of summer hospitality into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition to the hotels, many families have built summer homes and spend all or part of their summers in Southwest Harbor, some of them permanently integrating into the community. Lately, new retirees have added to the year round population.

Southwest Harbor was the first town to allow automobiles on its streets in 1911. Before that a summer resident wanting to drive his car off island, had to take a boat from Northeast Harbor to Southwest Harbor where his car was garaged.

With the fame, beauty and accessibility of Acadia National Park, the tourism industry continues to flourish and has long since outdistanced the more traditional fishing and boatbuilding industries in terms of economic impact and importance.

The Town continues to have the feel and vitality of a year round working community, but its identity as a service center has eroded in recent years with more people traveling to Ellsworth or using the internet for much of their purchasing.

\*Southwest Harbor Historic Resources Inventory, Deborah Thompson, Ph.D. Architectural Historian, 1999.

Other sources:

Traditions and Records, Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mrs. Seth S Thornton, 1938.

The Rusticator’s Journal, edited by Tammis E. Coffin, 1993.