

Final Draft

Chapter 5

LAND USE

Descriptive Summary

In the time since Bridgton's 2004 Comprehensive Plan was adopted the primary concerns and intentions of the citizens have remained the same; managing growth in ways that retain our special New England small-town character and protect our many natural resources. As the sub-text around these concerns has shifted and evolved priorities have changed accordingly.

Two major trends that have influenced Bridgton's growth and land use for the last half-century continue to do so. First, the attraction of Bridgton's beautiful natural setting continues to draw people from all over. Tourists, from day-hikers to summer campground dwellers, continue to find their way here and there continues to be growth in the second-home community. The town's lakes and streams, open spaces and natural beauty have resulted in continued extensive development, especially along the shores of its lakes, while Shawnee Peak Ski Area continues to be a draw for both visitors and second-home interest.

Secondly, Bridgton's commercial land use was formed originally by its history as a mill town. The downtown area grew to serve the mills located along the waterways running through it, and accommodating a growing population of mill workers. Since then, Bridgton's role as a regional commercial center has seen highs and lows. There is growing interest to restore Bridgton as that regional commercial hub once again, building on its setting amid lakes and streams, its location at the intersection of two state highways, and the character of its downtown as real assets.

These trends create opportunity in Bridgton for development and growth, especially in the downtown and along the corridors. Currently development is controlled primarily through shoreland zoning, which strongly influences downtown land use, as do FEMA floodplain maps. Other land use regulation includes site plan review for commercial uses and subdivision regulation review, both administered by the Planning Board. Site plan review is not judicial; it does not control the use of the property but rather how the land is impacted by the development. The Planning Board's review consists of all site development, including but not limited to storm water, parking, lighting, pedestrian/vehicular access, and landscaping. The Planning Board continually reviews its ordinance to determine adequacy and clarity. Subdivision regulation review follows the state statute as to process and seeks to control the impact of such development on the land, the neighbors, and on town services.

Final Draft

Development patterns also revolve around the four major water bodies, Long Lake, Highland Lake, Moose Pond, and Woods Pond, as well as other smaller ponds, streams, tributaries and significant wetlands and aquifers. Residences and seasonal homes follow this pattern. Route 302 from Portland to New Hampshire creates a corridor-like pattern of a mix of residences giving way to commercial development, taking advantage of the thousands of cars that travel this corridor daily. These elements of water attraction and corridor traffic offer opportunity for development with access and recreation as market forces. Another asset Bridgton has is considerable soils suitable for small to medium agricultural uses. Agricultural development is becoming a nationally recognized economic driver for Maine. With careful planning, Bridgton can capitalize on its character and its proximity to remarkable natural resources, becoming an ever more unique commercial destination point.

Like many New England towns, Bridgton has distinct residential villages. Along with the downtown village areas, North Bridgton and South Bridgton have their own distinct village character.

North Bridgton is anchored by Bridgton Academy, which owns and uses many of the buildings in the village, including the old church. The village has a public library and its own Post Office. In a preliminary assessment by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission in 2010 the center of the village along Route 37 was deemed eligible to be in the National Register as an historic district. North Bridgton village lies adjacent to the Route 117 corridor connecting Bridgton with Harrison and points north, with views down Long Lake. In the areas up away from the village, mountain and lake views are enjoyed from some of the choicest residential properties in town. In public meetings held by the Comprehensive Plan Committee in this neighborhood in the fall of 2012, discussion centered around economic development in Bridgton's downtown, with residents supporting the need for a robust economy with ample goods and services. There was also discussion about the role and relationships between the Town and the Academy and the meeting helped to open this necessary dialogue. Attendees also expressed interest in having a small neighborhood store and/or eatery in the village, as there once had been, as long as such development was in keeping with the character of the village. There was general concern that new compatible commercial development should be centered in the downtown and along the corridors and that care should be taken with corridor development to keep these areas from becoming "strip commercial." There was general interest and acceptance of the concept of zoning beyond what is in current town regulation.

South Bridgton is reminiscent of a rural farming village. With the historic South Bridgton Church at its center, the village is characterized by its open fields, orchards, and rolling hills. The water bodies here are smaller and exude the instantly familiar character of small camps on a pond. Camp Micah is built on the site of Moose Pond Lodge, the oldest camp of its kind in the state. Camp Pondicherry is home to Maine's Girl Scout Camp.

Final Draft

This part of town connects Bridgton to its neighbors to the south and provides a visual respite from the more heavily travelled ways. In the fall of 2012, the Committee met in this neighborhood and a major topic was the need for some kind of protection from land uses that conflict with the serenity of this mostly residential area. This group also voiced support for a strong and healthy downtown, for careful management of growth along the corridors, and for zoning.

Bridgton's downtown village neighborhoods spread from Main Street in all directions, out to the west beyond the Town Hall, along South High Street past the First Congregational Church, and Bridgton Hospital, by the Town Beach and along Highland Lake to Dugway Road, on the side streets around Main Street, across and around Pondicherry Square where Routes 302 and 117 intersect, and all the way to Plummer's Landing on Long Lake (see Future Land Use map). Many homes in these neighborhoods are older and in disrepair. As these old homes are purchased and renovated, the interest in these residential neighborhoods continues to grow. Much of the housing stock in the downtown's neighborhoods is affordable for people making the median income for the State of Maine (\$48,000); however, there are fewer homes affordable for Bridgton's median income (\$40,000).¹ The neighborhoods all have the crucial elements of great neighborhoods²: walkable to goods, services, and recreation; front setback lines conducive for socializing amongst neighbors and passersby; and buildings in a pedestrian scale (2.5 stories is considered optimal for residential scale.)³

The downtown commercial area is characterized by the rolling and curving topography of Main Street and by the eclectic variety of building styles. The critical elements for an economically robust downtown are all here: public facilities such as the Bridgton Public Library, Bridgton Community Center, and the Town Municipal Complex; parks with outdoor seating, pedestrian access through the business area and into residential neighborhoods, and a variety of new business openings and existing business expansions. Public investment continues on Depot Street in the downtown, with sidewalks coming there soon and with the town's adoption of Pondicherry Park. This park, along with a Reny's, a farmer's market, and a movie theater give Bridgton's downtown a unique presence unmatched by any other in the region. Nearly 10,000 cars⁴ drive Main Street each day, offering both challenges and opportunities for an active, inviting downtown to capture the interest of those passing through and cause them to stop and eat, shop, and generally seek goods and services here.

¹ Source: 2008-2012 US Census Update

² Source: 2013 American Planning Association *Great Places in America: Neighborhoods*

³ Source: Preservation Nation; National Main Street Center; Congress for New Urbanism; The Small Town Planning Handbook 2007 Segedy & Others

⁴ Source: Maine Department of Transportation 2012 Maine Transportation Count Book

Final Draft

The highway corridors each have their own character as well. Route 302 from Naples is a major entry point, passing the Lake Region High School. With open land for future development, it forms a visually appealing approach to Town, through blasted rock outcroppings and wooded swampland. Route 302 from Fryeburg also has open land, its own share of swamps and its own appeal as one crosses the Moose Pond causeway with Pleasant Mountain above. Route 117 from Harrison is an open rural highway with limited curbs cuts and a wide right-of-way. It has Lakeside residential development on Long Lake to the east, and a wonderful view down the lake where the highway passes the village. Routes 117 and 107 coming from Denmark and Sebago are smaller, rural roads--though still heavily travelled; hilly and curvy, passing through mostly woods broken here and there by ponds, open fields, orchards and farmland, with sparse, mostly residential development.

In the last 10 years

Since 2004, the attraction of the area to those building second homes, influence on Bridgton of the commuter/bedroom community needs of people working in the Portland and Lewiston-Auburn areas, and technologies which allow people to do all kinds of work from a home in the country have all been growth factors in Bridgton. From 2003 through 2013 Bridgton awarded 632 permits for new construction, 27 for new commercial construction and 554 for single-family residences, with the balance in garages and additions. Of these residential permits, 89 were for lakefront homes, and 465 were for non-lakefront homes.

The 2004 Comprehensive Plan reflected the community's desire to control growth and especially commercial development to protect the Town's natural resources and its small town rural character and way of life above all. This time the desire for a vibrant economy while still protecting the Town's natural resources and special charm has emerged as the priority. The shifting of the weights of these two concerns is due in part to the current economic challenges we face, and also in part to the effective implementation of the last plan's goals around protecting resources and creating recreational opportunities. The continued work on the Steven's Brook Trail, the BRAG playing fields project and the creation of Pondicherry Park have all directly served these goals set out by the community.

Along with this renewed desire for well-planned economic growth is a growing understanding in the community that with that careful planning, we can have a vibrant economy without losing what we love most here in Bridgton. This understanding was recently evidenced by the adoption of an ordinance in June 2012 requiring that new development or changed use of any property on Main Street in the Downtown be used for commerce on the ground floor, facing the street. Furthermore, plans are being explored for a possible expansion of the wastewater system, currently serving only part of the Downtown.

Final Draft

There is growing understanding in the community that municipal sewer is an important tool to encourage desired development as well as having a critical role in the protection of Bridgton's water resources that are so important to the future of our town and its citizens.

Most projects that came out of the Land Use goals of the 2004 plan were constructed in the years from 2004-2010; new town parking lots, the retrofitting of many buildings, and the growth and expansion of several businesses in the Downtown being examples. In the slowed economy of the last several years Bridgton has been struggling again with closing stores and empty buildings. Currently though, there is some hopeful revitalization in the Downtown with the opening of several promising new businesses in the summer of 2013.

The 2004 Plan had as one of its "neighborhood values" the prohibition of "big box" development. The push and pull in the community around development was made evident in the 2010 vote not to prohibit fast food or big box development, allowing for the opening of a McDonald's in town in the fall of 2012. This vote was a catalyst for the Town to move again toward some kind of development plan. The concern then and now is that development be well managed, especially along Portland Street--at risk of becoming a bleak commercial strip, and an unappealing approach to the Downtown.

While Bridgton still contains a great deal of open land and is still essentially a rural community, the call for a comprehensive approach to development, to both encourage it and to have control of what goes where and how it looks is clear. The 2004 Comprehensive Plan set out the beginning of a framework for zoning. The Economic Development Plan, completed in 2005, called the Kent Plan, provided a further concept for implementing the Plan's strategies. Some of the recommendations in the Kent Plan were followed; the previously mentioned downtown parking lots for example. Since then an effort has been made to gear up and pursue the work of the 2004 Plan. A development plan for the highway corridors has been discussed, the principles of Form-Based Code have been studied, and the community has been drawn into a series of public sessions over the last three years. In addition, studies are being conducted for a possible expansion of the wastewater system. Through careful planning, the Town can embrace new development while retaining its rural, small-town character.

The Bridgton Comprehensive Plan Committee conducted several community input and design events, starting in the summer of 2011 with a series of design charrettes to acquaint citizens with the concepts of Form Based Code. In a series of neighborhood potluck supper meetings in the fall of 2012 the Committee began to talk about issues and discussion ensued around the downtown, the corridors, and economic growth for the town. In the summer of 2013 two series of meetings were held at local pubs and restaurants, with discussion around the goals and strategies laid out by the Committee.

Final Draft

All of these public meetings reaped great participation and input from citizens who attended. Most voiced support for the ideas the Committee had put to paper so far. Desire for a strong downtown business district to act as an economic engine, concern for how the corridors get developed, and overall support for zoning to be created for the town's protection and compatible growth were the main themes heard in all the meetings. These events served two important purposes: the Committee was able to share with residents the broad concepts currently being considered and in turn, residents conveyed specific ideas about the future of Bridgton and its neighborhoods to the Committee.

This Comprehensive Plan expands on the goals set in previous years and lays out a framework for zoning in its Future Land Use Plan, Chapter 11. This Future Land Use Plan suggests methods for retaining rural character while encouraging well-designed commercial development, and offers strategies for enhancing housing, retail activity, and cultural and recreational opportunities both in the downtown village and throughout the corridors in and out of town in order to create meaningful growth areas, attract new business for a more vibrant economy, and further enhance the quality of life here in Bridgton.

In conclusion, the goals of the 2004 Comprehensive Plan have been revisited and built upon during these past three years. The strong support for zoning shown in the new Future Land Use Plan (Chapter 11) directly reflects the call to action found in the community.