

PROTECTING

Coastal Communities: Managing Change

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Photograph: iStockphoto

Many New England coastal communities have long been protected from large-scale development. Marked by poor accessibility, stiff land-use and zoning restrictions, and a resistance to municipal water and sewer infrastructure, they have been able to control the pace and type of development. Today, however, technology has made the coast and islands more accessible. At the same time, fishing and fishing-related endeavors such as boat building that for hundreds of years supported communities' economic vitality have ceded to industries such as tourism and the construction of vacation homes.

Over the past 30 years the authors have had an active research interest in the evolution of coastal communities and have seen them undergoing a transformation more dramatic than any of the last century. The changes threaten the character, environment, identity, and quality of life of coastal residents, with low- and moderate-income people often hit hardest. Whereas in times past there was room for teachers, firefighters, police, and service workers in these communities, the exorbitant increase in housing prices is forcing them to live inland. To see this impact, just note who is commuting on the Hyannis-Nantucket air service each morning: They are the plumbers, roofers, repair people, and service workers that make Nantucket Island function.

When unplanned growth occurs, higher real estate prices cause fishermen and other laborers to seek homes elsewhere. The coastline starts to look like a monotonous stretch of built structures, and the picturesque working harbors that tourists crave begin to disappear. Fortunately, with careful planning, states and communities can diversify coastal areas to keep the traditional character. They do not need to put a moratorium on all change, but they should protect, nurture, and enhance what they most value.

Trends

Five broad trends are pressuring New England's coastal communities: new ways to connect people, changing demographics, real estate speculation, increased tourism (and recreational boating), and infrastructure expansion.

Connectedness

Coastal communities are no longer set apart from the urban core as much as they once were. Even where physical access is limited, technology and telecommunications provide a form of geographic freedom.

Telecommunicating, the Internet, and videoconferencing are having an impact on business. For example, an employee can work from an island home and only go to the city for essential meetings. The ability to connect this way has real advantages, but the feeling of getting away from it all is eroded. Access to more television stations, daily newspapers, and daily mail delivery (including United Parcel Service and FedEx) also affect a coastal community's sense of being a place apart. Although such connectedness is not negative, it highlights the need for residents to decide if and how they want to protect their locale's unique character and small-town ambience.

Changing Demographics

Established residents of coastal communities are ageing, and their children are finding it harder to stay. Demand for housing by upper-income retirees and vacationers is pushing up land and housing prices, making lodging difficult for the elderly, young people, and the new service workers—often immigrants—who come in to support tourism and construction.

The question is not how to arrest change but how to deal with it in an optimal way. Individuals and policymakers at all levels need to decide whether it is acceptable to let islands and coastal communities become upper-class

havens or whether they want to seek a more balanced, sustainable pattern of growth.

Speculation

Increased development of elaborate vacation homes leads to increased real estate prices and taxes. If traditional residents and workers cannot afford to pay the taxes, they often sell their properties to developers who turn them into more expensive houses or condos, exacerbating the affordable-housing problem.

Fortunately, communities have access to tools that can help them slow the growth of development in areas they want to preserve and protect. They can do so through sophisticated zoning techniques that limit retail activity, enable planned unit and cluster development, and tighten septic requirements. Above all—as seen in Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, and Block Island in Rhode Island—they can use land banking, the purchase of development rights, and protective conservation easements to ensure that the character of the community remains intact.

If communities are to manage change without turning into no-growth outdoor museums, they must plan ahead.

The Quandary

Virtually every harbor in New England is facing the coming conflict between the fishing industry and tourism. Many fishermen will continue to face restrictions on where they work, what they can catch, and when they can operate. As a result, one can expect fewer fishermen working in local harbors. As their numbers have declined, there has been a steady rise in activities and facilities dedicated to recreational boating, day trippers, and sunset cruises. Fishing and tourism are rarely compatible. Here is the quandary: How do communities plan for the long-term revival of the fishing industry in the context of increased tourism demand? Gloucester and New Bedford in Massachusetts and numerous other communities around New England are facing those issues.

Infrastructure Stresses

Increased use and activity burden existing infrastructure. Coastal and island communities need to plan to protect their fragile ecosystems and find ways to handle increases in traffic, congestion, and stresses on water and sewer systems.

The first step is for residents to define what kind of community and values they collectively support. Some towns engage in public decision-making exercises to answer key questions: What is important to the people that live here? Should we embrace the inconvenience and charm of a narrow, winding road, or should we accommodate the growing traffic with wider, straighter roads? Should we expand the sewer and accept the new restaurants that spring up along the line, or does quality of life mean staying small?

Managing Change

If communities are to manage change without turning into no-growth outdoor museums, they must plan ahead. The following techniques are recommended:

- Encourage residents to come together to create a balanced and sustainable vision for the community. Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts, for one, implemented a yearlong visioning process to determine "Chappy values." Gloucester did something similar for its harbor master plan.
- Define the fundamental character and purpose of the community and agree on what needs to be protected. Gloucester, for example, has long prioritized its fishing industry. And Provincetown, Massachusetts, spurred on by the National Park Service, is starting to define what it values, too.
- Create a master plan with subsequent zoning regulations that will protect community character. Portland in Maine; Portsmouth in New Hampshire; and Fairhaven and New Bedford in Massachusetts are all working on this.
- Create regulations that protect the ecosystem and environment—a hot-button issue in towns like Fall River, Massachusetts.
- Define sustainable limits to growth.

- Determine what water-dependent uses are permissible, and place them in the zoning regulation. Bridgeport, Connecticut's efforts to enable a shopping center on its waterfront is an example of what can go wrong.

- Broaden the shoulders of the tourist season or create year-round activities to supplement the economy—coordinating the efforts in a way that doesn't let tourism become the only game in town.

- Plan on diversification in order to balance fishing, boating, retail, and residential activities.

- Stimulate housing that is affordable for workers, seniors, and other low- and moderate-income people.

- Plan for both a working and a recreational harbor.

Change Will Occur

Change will occur. The challenge is to balance multiple needs. Different uses of the waterfront could complement each other if carefully planned. A working harbor and a recreational harbor are not mutually exclusive. Increased building and growth in infrastructure do not always harm the environment. The key is to plan for change and understand it while protecting community character.

A long-term vision, a sound capital budget, and careful environmental stewardship can prevent unwanted consequences of unmonitored market forces. The character of New England has always been defined largely by its coastline, and communities owe it to posterity not to let the coastline develop haphazardly.

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