

Summary Notes from the Land Use Forum II

Hosted by the Bowdoinham Comprehensive Planning Committee
Wednesday November 1, 2023, Bowdoinham Community School

About the Forum

Why We Are Collecting Public Input

It's well established that Maine is in a housing crisis. Older folks are unable to stay in the communities where they grew up, and younger folks are unable to purchase home and/or afford to live near their jobs. As we prepare our new Comprehensive Plan, we want to hear from Bowdoinham residents and businesses about what YOU think. Specifically, we are considering changes to our land use ordinances that would allow for more housing, but want to hear from you first.

This was the second of two public input meetings we have planned to discuss land use. The first one was on the evening of October 11. Both meetings were facilitated by Craig Freshley of Good Group Decisions in Brunswick. All ages welcome. Snacks and drinks were provided.

Attendance

40-50 people attended.

Agenda

6:00 **Welcome**

- Comprehensive Planning Committee Chair Joanne Joy will offer opening remarks.
- Facilitator Craig Freshley will explain how the Forum will work.

6:05 **Preserving Open Space in the Residential / Agriculture District**

- There seemed to be consensus in our first forum that we should preserve our open spaces and rural character, and that we should reserve our best soils for agriculture. But how?
- We will begin with a brief presentation of some tools being used in other Maine towns to protect agricultural land.
- We will discuss as a full group and try to get consensus on the most promising approaches.

6:55 **Potential New Village District Near Richmond**

- Also at our first Forum, there seemed to be considerable interest in establishing a village district in the vicinity of Route 24 near the Richmond border; and area currently served by municipal sewer and water. Is there indeed favor for this idea?
- If so, should commercial and/or industrial activity be allowed in this district?
- Should septic systems be allowed, or should we require that new development use municipal sewer and water infrastructure?
- We will discuss in small groups and try to get consensus on the most promising approaches.

7:15 **Increasing Density in the Village**

- At the first Forum there seemed to be consensus to standardize the residential requirements of Village District 1 and 2, expand the districts to match availability of municipal water, and increase housing density. Yet how best to increase housing density?
- We will begin with a brief presentation of some tools being used in other Maine towns to protect agricultural land.
- We will discuss as a full group and try to get consensus on the most promising approaches.

7:45 **Closing Comments**

This is a chance for any last words from participants and committee members.

8:00 **Adjourn**

Ground Rules

- All views heard
 - Recognized before Speaking
 - Email comments welcome: Planning@Bowdoinham.com
 - Differing points of view okay
 - Listen with respect
- Understanding First
- We're here to advise, not decide
- Minimize distractions
- Flexible agenda and neutral facilitation

Introduction

- Joanne introduced Committee members
- In June we expect to vote on the Comprehensive Plan
- February is the deadline for proposed Land Use Ordinances
- We hope to have another public meeting required by the Planning Board

Opening Presentation

Comprehensive Planning Committee member Dave Asmussen presented the following:

- Dave explained how we have gotten feedback in several ways so far

- We are here tonight because we care about Bowdoinham and want to preserve the things we love
- Abbreviations
- Dave showed a graphic to demonstrate the size of ½ acre and a full acre
- He also explained the three zoning districts
 - Village district 1
 - Village district 2
 - Residential / Agricultural district
- And he explained the development approval process

Residential Agricultural District

Presentation

- Tools to increase density yet preserve open space
 - **Increase minimum lot size in R/A**
 - Decrease minimum lot size in village district
 - Increase density in R/A
 - Decrease density in R/A
 - Ratio of development between the R/A and Village
 - Example: for every two permits in the Village, allow just one in the R/A
 - **Increase open space requirements**
 - **Maximum lot size in the R/A**
- In bold are ones that Harald Bredesen says that have been successful in other communities

Comments

- Even though we see houses on rural roads in Bowdoinham, the density is actually quite low
 - There is lots of land behind the houses
- Skeptical that the town can do anything to limit small incremental development
- Most people who move to Bowdoinham want to live rurally
- The best we can do is limit large subdivisions in the agricultural area
- To keep Bowdoinham affordable we need to keep lot sizes small
- The issue of affordability is not a nut we can crack with any of these ideas

- The problem with adding density in the village is lack of a sewer system
- I don't think we need to change anything
 - Our ordinances have done a good job of keeping things the same
- Concerns about unintended consequences
 - Taxes going up due to increase in Rd. Frontage requirement
 - Easements to Land Trust would result in long term preservation
 - If we increase density there also needs to be infrastructure improvements and transportation improvements
- Don't like the idea of a 25 acre minimum lot size
 - That would prohibit me from subdividing my land for my family
- Our land use ordinance has been crafted in a way to keep it rural and it's worked
- Strategies to increase density in the village would require significant changes in our village ordinances
- We should consider wildlife values and ecological contributions also
- There are agricultural uses in the Village district, such as haying
- We shouldn't do anything that would constrain current landowners
- Already, a lot of prime farmland is preserved through conservation easements
- Idea: Incentivize use of conservation easements
- Development even in the village is expensive due to having to put in septic
- Soils in east Bowdoinham are some of the best soils in Maine and need to be preserved

Emerging themes

1. Skepticism that we're going to be able to stop development in the rural area or keep things affordable
2. Keep things mostly as they are – don't tinker with the ordinances too much
3. Actually do things now (change ordinances or put in special protections) to keep the rural character of the town

4. Take steps to preserve farmland and ecological contributions
By a show of hands, many people think that special rules to preserve special areas would be okay
5. Don't do things that will increase taxes
By a show of hands, about ¼ of participants indicated that we should keep taxes low
6. Concern about placing rules that will be a detriment to a specific landowner

Note: some of these themes are at odds with each other, such as #2 and #3. None-the-less, there were a number of people present who seemed to support each of these themes.

Route 24 Village District (Near Richmond)

Presentation

- Concentrating development helps lower infrastructure costs (and taxes) and can help preserve open space
- Questions
 - Do we generally like the idea of a village district at the north end of town?
 - Do we want to mirror Richmond's village standards?
 - What should be the boundaries of the district?

Comments

- Concern about taxes and property values going up
- Clarified that the Richmond Water District is okay with the idea
- Clarified that the Comp Plan is a map for change over the next ten years
 - The Comp Plan would not actually establish a new district, but might simply make the case that such a district would be useful, to be acted on later
 - The plan might call for ordinances that ALLOW for development in the village district. The town wouldn't actually drive such development.
- There is nothing in the district that looks like a village now but there is municipal sewer in this area
- The benefits of the district would likely accrue only or mostly to the people in that district

- The boundary of the district should not be any larger than necessary
- It makes sense to cluster development where there is already capacity
- There is an overriding issue about tax sustainability
 - My taxes should not go up to support affordability for someone else

The Village District I & II

Presentation

- Currently, two dwellings per acre are allowed
 - We could change that to increase density to allow multi-family housing, possibly ¼ acre lots with shared septic
- There does appear to be space in the Village Districts for more development

Comments

- The land ordinances that we have are doing a good job and there is no need to make changes
- It's more expensive to add people in rural areas than in already developed areas
- Allowing density in the village would allow kids to grow up and own their own homes in the village
- Increasing density in the village would be an efficient way to allow older people to stay in Bowdoinham
- The subdivision ordinance could be changed to better protect open space in the agriculture area
- We could allow industrial development in Village District 2 where there is existing three-phase power
- We should consider alternative technologies for sewage disposal in the village
- Many lots in the village are nonconforming and grandfathered
- There is a minimum lot size requirement in the village of 20,000 square feet regulated by the state (with same exceptions for smaller lot sizes in specific cases)

- It makes no sense to put more effluent in the ground
 - What we need is a sewage disposal system that benefits the whole town
 - How about the idea of shared holding tanks

Emerging Theme

- There seemed to be widespread support for increasing density in the village in order to allow Bowdoinham people to stay in Bowdoinham

Closing Comments

- Joanne thanked everyone for coming and encouraged people to send additional comments to Planning@Bowdoinham.com.