

Mount Desert Island Tomorrow: Building Community Capacity

By

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Introduction

An island is an easily imagined place. Bounded by water, island people make journeys to and fro, conscious journeys by boat or by bridge. They claim a strong sense of place, of belonging to the island and its life. Over the past century, Mount Desert Islanders, on the coast of Maine, have built greater capacity to describe a future that they want and work collaboratively toward that future. In early part of the 20th Century, that work was carried by elites, who supported public water and sewer systems, established Mount Desert Island Hospital and other charitable institutions, and who had the wisdom to set aside a remarkable portion of the island in public trust. In the closing decade of that century and since, a broader array of citizens, working outside of, but in collaboration with local government, have twice used a broadly participatory community development process to demonstrate the power of place, and the willingness of people to protect it.

Mount Desert Island (MDI) Tomorrow was first initiated in 1987 in response to citizen concerns that seasonal growth and development threatened the stability of the year-round community. In 2001, the process was re-vitalized to deal with persistent and new issues, and to tap into renewed citizen interest in the future of the island.

The earlier round used one-to-one interviews and neighborhood meetings to build involvement and to gather concerns and suggestions for constructive change. The current process makes use of email and a website to invite participation and keep diverse groups linked. In both processes, community newspapers were key allies.

Now, as in the initial process, non-profits provide key leadership, choosing to highlight that MDI Tomorrow runs parallel to and is supportive of efforts by each of the four island towns to respond to issues and plan for the future. Citizens in the current process are directly involved through participation in one of eight issue or project areas. Where the earlier process officially “stopped” when a “preferred future” of the island was published along with a summary of current conditions and trends, the current effort links vision with implementation.

The MDI Tomorrow process continues to inspire and reach out to citizens, as noted in a April 17, 2003 editorial in the Mount Desert Islander:

“Because it has been so integrated into the fabric of Mount Desert Island, the ongoing MDI Tomorrow effort attracts little attention as something new or innovative. The fact is, however, that MDI Tomorrow is anything but commonplace. The coming together of people from all walks of life, from all social and economic backgrounds, from all island towns, to talk of shaping the future is an extraordinary achievement seldom seen in other communities.”

“Too often, citizens and officials, particularly at the local level, are pulled and tugged by the tide of events. In most cases, folks consider themselves lucky just to be able to react to adverse situations that arise here and now. Finding a chance to brainstorm and identify and address problems while they still are relatively small and manageable is rare.”

“But rising above a pattern of last-minute reactions to chronic problems and beginning a tradition of proactive, long-range planning is the best way to establish a firm foundation for the future. While MDI Tomorrow has focused much attention on the obvious issues of housing, transportation, land use, health and economic growth, it also has included a youth component. What could inspire more hope for the future?”

The underlying strength of the MDI Tomorrow process is that it teaches people how to engage with issues and with one another to create the future, the essential capacity of any community. This paper will outline the origins and accomplishments of the process and conclude with a status report and discussion of the current effort.

A Quick History of Place

While Mount Desert Island figures into the early history of the North American continent, with artifacts of the Red Paint people going back thousands of years, through European exploration and settlement in the 1600s, our story begins with the settlers of the mid to late 1700s, who came when Maine was still part of Massachusetts, to farm and fish and harvest timber.

A century later, after Maine became its own state in 1820, artists and naturalists made their way from New York, Philadelphia and Boston; the results of their excursions brought “rusticators” eager to board with farmers and escape the stifling summer heat of the cities. Farmers became entrepreneurs, with boarding houses growing into hotels, and the village of Bar Harbor soon eclipsed the original town of Eden, and became a resort to rival Newport in Rhode Island. Some who came had money to invest, and built summer homes. John D. Rockefeller settled in Seal Harbor and built carriage roads that are now a key asset of Acadia National Park. Among those early summer residents, a handful saw development threatening to overtake the island, and established Hancock County Trustees for Public Reservations to acquire scenic land, mountains and shorefront, which they later donated as a National Monument, later established as Acadia National Park in 1919.

The summer hotels and summer colony coexisted with the new national park between World Wars I and II, while more middle class folks began to explore the continental US by car, shunning the hotels for simpler fare in public campgrounds, including those in Acadia. Following the end of the Second World War, a disastrous forest fire blackened 10,000 acres of park land, as well as hotels, year-round and summer homes. The traditional economy of fishing and farming was eroded somewhat by the rise of motels and commercial campgrounds in the 1950s and ‘60s, but boat builders could build pleasure craft as well as lobster boats and most thrived.

Recent Growth of A Mixed Economy

Mount Desert Island, connected by bridge to the mainland since the 1920s, is home to Acadia National Park and four towns (Bar Harbor, Southwest Harbor, Tremont and the Town of Mount Desert) with three other island communities, Cranberry Isles, Swans Island and Frenchboro connected via ferry service. Population in the winter months is around 11,000 people, but in the summer it doubles as seasonal residents return. On any given night there are probably another 10,000 people in hotels, rental units and campgrounds, for an estimated total summer time population of 30-35,000 people.

Current year-round employment includes fishing, boatbuilding, construction trades, finance, healthcare (a 49 bed hospital and outpatient services, a nursing home and a retirement community with health services) and scientific research (with over 1100 workers at the Jackson Laboratory, a highly regarded center for mammalian genetics research, breeding mice for research throughout the world and the MDI Biological Laboratory, using dogfish shark and other marine organisms for its research into human

health). Seasonal tourism boosts the economy from June to late October including hotels, bed and breakfasts, campgrounds, restaurants, art galleries, gift shops, bike and kayak touring, whale watching, sightseeing cruises and other amenities. The “shoulder seasons” of tourism, though thin in many areas, are spreading. Lobster is served year round.

A profile today reveals the world-class Abbe Museum of native arts and culture, bustling libraries in each island town, four grade-schools and an alternative school, a well-supported island-wide high school (with winning athletic teams, and prized music, drama and arts accomplishments), and over 80 vibrant non-profit organizations, from food pantries and a daycare center, to yacht clubs, three strong community recreational facilities, including an island-wide YMCA, historical societies and summer arts, music and theater programs.

Factors and Issues That Gave Rise To MDI Tomorrow

With exception of a short tourism season in July and August, the island was slow to grow in the 1960s and 70s. However, a mixed economy emerged in the 1980s from foundations in the traditional sectors of fishing and boatbuilding, the expansion of the Jackson Laboratory, and the establishment of College of the Atlantic (COA) in 1972. In fact, the founding trustees of the College saw it as a stimulant to the local economy. (COA now offers a undergraduate and graduate degrees in human ecology to a student population of 250, with an annual direct economic contribution of \$12 million.) The U.S. Coast Guard and National Park service brought federal dollars and retirees moving to the area brought pension dollars, all of which circulate in the local economy. New investments began to show up in the hotel and restaurant sector, and a slowly growing population supported a variety of cultural organizations year round. In the mid 1970s, the four towns and Acadia National Park formed the MDI League of Towns, to work on island-wide issues and joint projects like solid waste disposal and joint purchasing. The National Park Service, the University of Maine and College of the Atlantic began to contribute scientific research to natural resource management decisions.

A housing and hotel construction boom began in the mid 1980s, with marketing efforts bringing growing number of summer visitors. Some of these followed the trends from a century before—visitors liked what they experienced on vacation and began to build second homes for seasonal use and after retirement. Newspaper coverage of these trends in 1987 led to a public forum and to the original MDI Tomorrow process. The overarching issue of that era was the rapid pace and cumulative impacts of development. Town planning boards reviewed individual projects, but there was no ability to manage growth across the four main towns. People worried about summertime “carrying capacity” and its impact on the quality of life for residents and the experience for visitors.

People also spoke of other issues facing the island:

- Sewage and solid waste disposal
- Quality and supply of drinking water
- Protection of agriculture and open space
- Traditional access to shore and uplands
- Housing, land costs and property tax structure
- Traffic and transportation.

What Did We Learn from the First MDI Tomorrow Process (1987-91)

The key elements of the original community development process included a multi-sector planning group, interviews with key informants and the use of a matrix to assure participation by natives and newcomers, young and old, men and women, and representatives of all towns. A University of Maine Cooperative Extension educator provided staffing to a steering committee. The group held facilitated neighborhood meetings to deepen our understanding of people's views, commissioned an economic study and participated with the local newspaper in a Harris Poll. The group created a sourcebook / workbook, and took it through several drafts with community input, which resulted in a published "preferred future" for Mount Desert Island, distributed as a supplement to Bar Harbor Times in June, 1991.

Several observations about that three-year project bear repeating here:

- Community attitudes and values shaped the process
- There was a underlying capacity to identify and solve problems and meet the needs of community members
- The organizational structure of the community encouraged participation of most of its members
- The community demonstrated the means to build, maintain and renew leadership
- Community members discovered a means to build consensus and articulate a shared vision about a preferred, island-wide future

Island Network Conferences Provided Follow Up (1992-1997)

Shortly after publication of the "preferred future" of Mount Desert Island, a number of issues continued to bubble at the community level. Problems with town sewer outfalls, affordable housing and concerns about teenagers prompted Jill Goldthwait, then chair of the Bar Harbor Town Council and an emergency room nurse, to approach key participants in MDI Tomorrow to suggest an island-wide conference. "We can't wait for others to solve our problems, we've got to do it ourselves," she said.

As the steering committee considered the suggestion, it answered a nagging problem with the original effort. There wasn't any means of implementation or follow-through for the good ideas contained in the newspaper supplement. A planning group developed an invitation list and a format, whereby issues were profiled for discussion in key arenas:

local government, education, health/social services, business and environment. Authors for the issue profiles were tapped to write a one-to-two page overview and presentation during the first section of the day-long conference, which was held in November, after the busy tourism season. Following presentation of issues, representatives from each arena were encouraged to group and discuss the issues and propose alternative solutions. A second plenary session served as a marketplace for working groups. Participants voted by caucusing in working groups where they wanted to contribute time and resources. The only charge during the caucus was for each working group to name one or two conveners, and to name a time and place for an initial meeting. This information was then made available to all attendees as the conference ended, and to a mailing list of those who expressed interest but could not attend.

As in the economic marketplace, some of the working groups were successful and others faded. Following the first conference, a non-profit was established to provide temporary housing for high school students who had broken with their families. Another effort established a high school internship program with island employers. Others tackled less bounded issues such as affordable housing and expanding the shoulder-seasons for tourism related trade. Over the next decade, five such “Island Network Conferences” were held, framing issues and proposing alternative action that led to positive change.

A Look Back at Accomplishments from the First Round

During the summer of 2001, several participants from the original MDI Tomorrow process observed that issues like congestion and affordable housing were back on the radar scope of many community members. They urged that we consider bringing people back together to see if it was time to take another look ahead. Maine Coast Heritage Trust and University of Maine Cooperative Extension took the lead, and invited a cross-section of the island community to meet in mid October. About twenty-five people attended and reflected on positive changes on MDI, many of which had ties to either the “preferred future” outlined in the MDI Tomorrow process, or the succeeding Island Network Conferences:

- Island Connections, a multi-purpose program involving and serving elders;
- Island Voices, a coalition of some 70 non-profits organized as a network to provide services to its members and articulate the scope and contributions of the not-for-profit sector;
- Mount Desert Community Trust, a single town housing trust incorporated after an Island Network Conference and follow-up meetings on housing
- Acadia Homes for Students, providing support and linkages for teens needing housing in order to stay in high school;
- MDI Community Health Plan, a collaborative effort between health care providers (MDI Hospital and ancillary services) and employers (large and small) to promote health and provide alternatives to private health insurance;
- MDI High School Internships, providing placement for students in a variety of businesses and non-profits;

- Kids Corner, a child care center started and continued with support from local businesses, non-profits, parents and the town of Bar Harbor; and
- Island Explorer Bus Service, which used the public dialogue of MDI Tomorrow to help build the case for start-up support for the system.

Island Explorer—A success story

The Island Explorer was developed through a multi-stakeholder planning process that included the Acadia National Park, Friends of Acadia, a non-profit dedicated to increasing public and private resources supporting the park mission, Downeast Transportation, a non-profit public bus system, the Maine Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, the MDI League of Towns, and others. By 2001, 18 clean burning propane Explorer busses shuttled some 240,000 visitors between the islands four towns and sites within Acadia, eliminating the need for up to 50,000 automobile trips. Ridership increased in the next two years and leveled off in 2004. Local taxpayers support operation of the bus system because residents as well as visitors use the busses, they feel the busses reduce congestion, and they obviate the need for towns to build new parking spaces—visitors already have a parking space at their hotel, bed and breakfast or campground. Architects of the system were able to move quickly to implement it due in large part to the community consensus on the use of public funds for busses. “It made it easy to apply for planning and implementation grants because MDI Tomorrow had so clearly demonstrated the need and a vision,” said Tom Crikelair, the local transportation planner who designed the system¹.

Other Changes in the Community

The group meeting in 2001 noted other positive changes “envisioned” in the 1991 description of a preferred future, even though there was no direct “linkage” to MDI Tomorrow/Island Network activities:

- Expansion, renovation and rejuvenation of three island community recreational facilities: Harbor House, Neighborhood House and the MDI YMCA;
- Expansion of life-long learning through Acadia Senior College;
- Rebuilding the Jackson Laboratory after a 1989 fire, and the major expansions of both the Jackson Lab and the MDI Bio Lab with state funding for research and development;
- School upgrades and new programs at the MDI High School and grade-schools in Tremont and Southwest Harbor, Bar Harbor and Mount Desert;
- Comprehensive planning activities in MDI towns that attempted to balance commercial and second-home growth with community and environmental quality;

¹ Personal communication. Also, see the website for Island Explorer Bus system, <http://www.exploreacadia.com/index.html> for more information.

- Public water system investments, some for expansion and some in response to federal mandates;
- Expansion of cultural opportunities and resources with the Abbe Museum, the MDI Historical Museum, and the George B. Dorr Natural History Museum;
- Federal and local investments to expand the capacity of sewage treatment plants in Bar Harbor, with ongoing work in other towns; and
- Expansion of the shoulder seasons, in the fall aided by the arrival of cruise ships whose passengers add over \$12 million to the local economy.

The group went on to suggest other changes and issues that on Mount Desert Island over the last decade:

- We live in an electronic, information-driven, technology-supported “world”, but it remains important to recognize the bedrock values of a healthy ecosystem and vibrant community life
- Our maritime connections have been affected by global and local trends
- Families and children are facing increased pressures and risks to their health
- The question of a summer-time “carrying capacity” continues as a concern
- Environmental issues such as air and water quality affect residents, businesses and visitors
- Village centers are losing the goods and services necessary for a year-round economy; the lack of housing constrains employers
- Despite traffic congestion during summer months, more and more workers commute to mainland jobs, shop in mainland stores and send their children to mainland schools.

The Challenge in Community Process: Representing The Community as a Whole

Participants in the 2001 organizing meeting of MDI Tomorrow discussed who was missing from the discussion, and how issues of class and education divide people, especially in community processes. Notably absent from the meeting were those who may have felt disenfranchised or little capacity to chart their own future. Some of those divisions were addressed in the original MDI Tomorrow process by using diversity among interviewees to define issues and weigh in on “preferred futures”. The group reminded itself to deal with these “divides” if we were to arrive at goals and outcomes that truly improve the quality of life for all MDI residents, such as the Island Explorer.

MDI Tomorrow—an Outline of Process for 2001-2004

A steering committee agreed to meet again to undertake the groundwork for a revitalized MDI Tomorrow. Additional sponsors were added: Friends of Acadia, College of the Atlantic, the Jackson Laboratory, Acadia National Park, the Healthy Acadia Coalition led by MDI Hospital, Maine Sea Coast Mission, and others. A revised mission statement was adopted:

To help citizens and communities of Mount Desert Island identify and build consensus about the future of the island and to work cooperatively to protect and improve the health of its families, communities, economy and environment.

The steering committee outlined a multi-year process, paralleling the earlier MDI Tomorrow effort and incorporating lessons learned about the importance of implementation, evaluation and outreach:

1. A “user-friendly” report on the current “State of the Island” based on the 2000 Census and other data
2. A vision of the preferred future of the island (based on citizen input, surveys, focus groups, neighborhood meetings, etc) stating “what we want for the future” and “why we want it”
3. An implementation plan that outlines various strategies, project leadership and partners, with a commitment to follow through, with MDI Tomorrow possibly serving as a catalyst over the next decade
4. An evaluation process that allows MDI Tomorrow and its partners to periodically check on and report to the community on progress based on indicators or benchmarks
5. An ongoing website, that might serve both as a location for useful information and a place for citizens, organizational and community leaders to exchange views and react to plans and proposals

The steering committee began gathering citizen views and involvement over the spring and summer of 2002. They distributed drafts of a “state of the island report” and a vision statement at a community conference in November in which two hundred residents and stakeholders participated. A majority of these attendees returned to a follow-up session in April of 2003 to enroll in project groups that framed an agenda in response to the “state of the Island” and vision statements. By that time, over 300 citizens were receiving regular updates on the process, as well as notices and notes from each project group meeting.

Project groups worked on several simultaneous initiatives:

- A community housing summit, leading to a revitalized Island Housing Trust, in September 2003
- Connecting consumers, food pantries, schools, the meals programs for elders and local restaurant chefs to local food producers (farmers and fishers)
- Establishing a “Communities for Children and Youth” leadership council, bringing all the agencies and organizations serving children and youth to a common table to identify assets, needs and strategies for individual and collaborative work
- Prioritization of bike and pedestrian projects
- Development of a “portable” presentation for each town that outlines how zoning ordinances are shaping land-use and housing decisions, perhaps in ways that are contrary to what people really want

- Engaging youth in community issues and organizations
- Dialogue and activity to further expand the “year-round” economy
- Creating an action plan for health in the MDI region
- Conducting a statistically valid community survey, comparable to the 1990 Harris Poll, to seek public views on policy options to address key issues.

Community Survey

Throughout the work by issue and project groups, many people continued to ask for data on community opinion. The steering committee sought proposals and chose to work with staff at the University of Maine. In December, 2003, after six months of groundwork, including soliciting questions from each working group, researchers mailed a community survey to 2000 randomly selected year-round and seasonal residents. 54% responded to questions that will help decision-makers with policy questions. Among the findings (taken from *Shaping Our Future*, MDI Tomorrow newspaper supplement, June 10, 2004):

- 80% said that protection of open-space and environmental quality was a high or very high priority.
- 73 % favored encouraging residential development in areas where sewer and water services already exist, and an equal percentage favored strengthening town ordinances to preserve wetlands, watersheds and wildlife habitat.
- At the same time, 81% said that promoting a year-round economy was a high priority, with nearly that percentage indicating that marine industries and fisheries should have access to the “working waterfront” that is under intense development and property tax pressure.
- 84% of respondents felt that promoting healthy growth and social development of children and youth was a high priority, including increasing healthy food choices, increasing public transportation for youth and expanding the youth role in local community organizations and municipal committees

3rd Community Conference in April, 2004—public opinion and policy choices

While these and other survey findings were of interest to residents, elected officials and community leaders, the steering committee wanted to find out about the kinds of trade-offs people would be willing to make, in order to protect the environment and enjoy the benefits of a vibrant, year-round economy and attend to the needs of children and youth. Drawing on a model of facilitated table discussions and polling piloted by America Speaks, a national group, the steering committee designed a third community conference that would ask participants to engage in questions designed to further shape local policy. The group enlisted the help of the local high school technology instructor and two students to set up computers sending comments and opinions from each of ten tables to a central table, where a team looked for and reported trends and highlights before displaying them on large screens in the high school gymnasium. Trained teams of adult and youth facilitators and recorders at each table pushed the discussion to look for consensus around policy choices in four interconnected policy issues: community design

and land use, transportation, youth and housing. Before each topic discussed at the tables, one or more short presentations by issue “experts” laid out background and policy options to consider. After each round of discussion, participants voted for the options they supported and provided comments. The “votes” were tallied and summarized for all to observe and comments appeared in summary on projection screens.

Key results included support for clustered housing that preserved open space; expanded bus services for year-round commuters and to give young people a means of participating in more after-school activities and to get to after-school jobs across the four island towns; creating youth positions and mentoring opportunities on local boards and committees; and providing options for co-housing (where a group of prospective home-owners work on the design of housing clusters, amenity services and ongoing input into policy) and more in-town housing options through “in-fill” development and reducing lot and square foot minimums per family to encourage more affordable rental and purchase opportunities.

In addition to seeing how these policy alternatives were supported and connected, participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity “just to talk with others about issues they were concerned with.” The conference had created the kind of safe space that citizens need in order to talk about what they want for the future. They said that the normal “public hearings” about specific proposals for development or roads or services come too late, and they were grateful for the opportunity to speak with “experts” and their neighbors about the issues and options.

Shaping Our Future: a Report to the Community—June 2004

After nearly two and a half years of meetings, conferences, working group sessions, surveys and community engagement, the steering committee was ready to summarize the progress to date. Cheryl Curtis, a business-owner who had been active in the MDI Tomorrow process and who had writing and editing experience, reviewed all of the written materials. With an outline of content from the steering committee, she set out to summarize the process and the results. Based on the experience with the 1991 summary, and now with two local newspapers published weekly, the steering committee contracted for a 16 page newspaper supplement and distribution to a combined circulation of 11,000. The cost of writing, layout and publication was covered in grants from the Maine Bureau of Health and the David Rockefeller Foundation.

The report covered the original issues: community design and land use, community housing, economic prosperity, transportation, community health and welfare of children and youth. Each section included highlights from the ‘state of the island’ report, a statement of the “preferred future” for that issue, pertinent results of the University of Maine community survey, and ongoing projects related to that issue. The latter included: work on local food connections, bike and pedestrian access and a feasibility study for a year-round storefront coop.

The report included the work of many contributors. Hope Rowan, a graduate student at College of the Atlantic, produced a map indicating current development and a projection of development in thirty years. Artist Sydney Roberts illustrated how “in-fill” development in Northeast Harbor might provide a mix of commercial, office and housing uses. The reports commissioned by the Island Housing Trust provided stark data regarding the costs of housing compared to the income of local residents. High school students, organized through a group calling itself Youth Engaged in Society, shared survey data indicating youth support for year-round transportation alternatives and shared strategies for dealing with drug and alcohol problems.

Readers of the report were urged to join up with projects and to start their own. As the report concluded, “Issues may shift and new opportunities may arise. But we must keep at it. We can’t wait for some future to happen. We must work together for a future we want. We are all just citizens here, and we invite you to join in.”

Fall 2004 Harvest Supper and MDI Tomorrow Spirit Awards

Following publication of the community report, the members of the steering committee sighed a collective relief. They had accomplished each of the steps they had set out for themselves 33 months before. Their work together had inspired many citizens to think and work positively for a future they wanted. Instead of forming a new non-profit organization, they chose to trust existing organizations and individuals to carry out the work. They wanted the spirit of collaboration and innovation to continue, guided by the shared vision of a preferred future.

Drawing on the tradition of a harvest celebration, the steering committee worked with the food connections task force to plan a pot-luck meal featuring local foods, and each project group was asked to submit nominations for MDI Tomorrow spirit awards, to recognize the good work inspired by the community vision. In October, 2004, the group hosted a festive dinner at the Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor. Local musicians played, people met and greeted one another, local candidates for legislative office were recognized and salads, fish chowder, cheeses, breads and desserts were served. Members of the steering committee then recognized several groups and individuals: a team of girls who had produced and premiered a video focusing on media and peer influences on how girls see themselves, a storeowner who had used good design principles on to construct a new downtown storefront with office and housing on upper floors, the YES teenagers, for their survey work of nearly 350 students, the Sustainable Agriculture program introducing basic agriculture and service learning opportunities for students at MDI High School, planning boards in two towns for their initiation of land use ordinances that supported both open space and housing goals, and the Island Housing Trust, for their leadership in the housing issue.

Community Housing—some early results

One of the issues identified at the initial organizational meeting of MDI Tomorrow in 2001 was the need for housing for the core community workforce. Each participant, it seemed, knew at least one young family who had moved “off island” when they had reached a point of wanting to establish a family, or who knew a renter who got fed up moving from a winter house into substandard apartments or worse, in what is referred to as “the summer scramble”, as the owners sought higher income for those same residences. Those affected were teachers, nurses, town employees-- people with a reasonable income but who could not afford to purchase or rent year-round housing.

Early in 2003, the steering committee organized a working group on community housing to gather data and frame the issue. Members of the working group included the head of the quasi-municipal housing authority (already organized to cover the four island towns); representatives from the Mount Desert Community Trust (a housing trust established after the first MDI Tomorrow process, but only for the town of Mount Desert), an architect, a landscape architect, a land planning professor from College of the Atlantic, a developer, a retired banker, a realtor, representatives from MDI Hospital and the Jackson Laboratory, planners from three of the four towns, and consumers. Others dropped in and out, depending on the agendas. The group met and developed important relationships over eighteen months. The director of the housing authority hosted the meetings, invariably at 7:30 in the morning, providing baked goods and coffee. The diverse viewpoints assured no rush to judgment about the nature of the problem or its solution.

The group teamed up with another MDI Tomorrow working group concerned with community design and land use, and sought feedback about the costs of housing from real estate developers and contractors. Part of the cost, they were told, came from land use ordinances that encouraged single-family homes on large lots in typical suburban sprawl patterns. In order to pass along savings to potential home-buyers, they needed the ability to cluster development and build on smaller lots in village centers connected to sewer and water.

Over time, the working group came to understand that the problem was even more complex, however. They heard anecdotal evidence that any house on the market had three or four groups of bidders: renters who were part of the community workforce or those had been recently hired; retirees and those seeking a second seasonal home near Acadia National Park; large seasonal business owners seeking housing for summer employees; and investors wanting to buy properties to supply the “weekly rental” market for vacationers. Due to the nature of the community as a “destination resort”, the housing market was always simmering.

But members of the working group were convinced that without some intervention, the very life-blood of the community was slipping away. At a MDI Tomorrow progress meeting (and spaghetti supper held to benefit a family with emergency health costs), Eric Henry, a local contractor and school board member galvanized listeners with his

prediction of the slow death of the town and island he loved. If young families could not afford to live “on the island”, where would future generations of volunteer fire-fighters come from? Who would volunteer in schools, churches and libraries? Who would help out as coaches, or serve on town boards and committees? And if young people lived elsewhere, wouldn’t they shop and bank elsewhere? As one observer later put it—there is a great danger that the community was being hollowed out by the market forces. “We need 500 houses in an affordable pool,” Mr. Henry said. “We need to buy up existing houses and we need to build new ones to make sure people, real people, have a place to live.”

But as the understanding of the issue deepened, the working group began to look to two existing assets and to seek help from other communities who had wrestled with the housing issue. One of the prime assets was the MDI Housing Authority, which had long used federal housing funds to provide assistance to community members with low incomes. The authority had successfully developed a “middle income” housing development called West Eden Meadows, blending public and private funds a few years before.

The second asset was housing trust that had arisen from an Island Networking conference in 1996, and operating in a single island town. With assistance from Cooperative Extension, the board of the housing trust developed a strategic plan that included expansion of the group’s mission and board of directors to encompass the whole island. As it worked to amend by-laws and recruit board members (several from within the MDI Tomorrow working group), it also identified allies in a similar island resort community on Martha’s Vineyard, off Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

Together with the housing authority and MDI Tomorrow, the newly named Island Housing Trust (IHT) organized a housing summit in the fall of 2003 and invited John Abrams to speak. John is the thoughtful and energetic spark-plug behind the Martha’s Vineyard housing trust and co-housing project, who encouraged his listeners with stories of small success over time. At the same time, the Island Housing Trust commissioned a housing market analysis and action plan from John Ryan, a consultant who had worked closely with the communities on Martha’s Vineyard. The consultant came back with facts and figures to back up the anecdotes the working group had been sharing for months. The study (MDI Community Housing Study Executive Summary, 2004, Island Housing Trust) showed a number of factors at work:

- Renter incomes were surprisingly low, in part because so many jobs are seasonal and pay low wages, and remaining a renter becomes steadily more difficult. From 1990 to 2000, the number of renters on Mount Desert Island paying 35% or more of their income in rent grew by 82% as compared to a 3% rise on a statewide basis.
- Housing and land prices on Mount Desert Island have risen dramatically. The median sales price of homes sold on MDI rose from \$146,000 in 2000 to \$265,000 in 2003. The affordability gap has grown, so that a median-income

renter needed to come up with an additional \$85,000 in order to afford a median priced home.

- Mount Desert Island wages are 27 percent lower than the state average, but the median home prices are 77 percent higher than the state median.
- From 1996-2003, MDI employers added nearly 1300 new jobs, while during the same time period, only 450 year round houses were added to housing stock. Most new jobs go to people who commute to the island.

The report showed a need for up to 400 units of housing by 2012, including 200 opportunities for purchase and 200 year-round rentals (not too different from Eric Henry's earlier projection scratched in pencil on the back of a shingle). Based on income and housing sales data, the report concluded that there was a gap of \$50,000 between what those seeking housing could afford and the average home price, or some \$20 million over 8-10 years. The community could make up that gap through a variety of strategies, including donation of land, private donations of cash, public funding, borrowing and providing incentives to developers.

The board of IHT stepped up to the challenge, committing to raise \$150,000 per year in an initial three-year campaign to hire an executive director and begin supporting individual housing initiatives, including strategies outlined in its action plan. As of this writing, the IHT has hired its first executive director, and has opened an office.

In the meantime, the MDI Housing Trust and College of the Atlantic learned that Fred Pooler, a local businessman was interested in selling a 200-acre farm and associated wetlands along a major freshwater aquifer. Working with Maine Coast Heritage Trust (a land trust with national reputation) and a local landscape architect who was part of the MDI Tomorrow working group, the Housing Authority organized the purchase. Much of the wetland portion of the property was protected by sale or conservation easement to Maine Coast Heritage Trust. The Housing Authority is working on developing 20-30 clustered units, with green design, shared septic and wells. Over 100 local residents have applied for consideration, under the guidelines that they have household income of less than \$65,000, are eligible for commercial mortgage loans and one member of the household has a full time job on Mount Desert Island. Drawing on its earlier experience in the West Eden Meadows project, the housing authority will use a shared equity ownership, so that if and when a home is sold, that proportion of its value due to land, plus appreciation, is returned to the housing authority.

Another feature of this housing project is a connection to MDI Tomorrow working groups concerned with local food supply and agriculture. The portion of the Pooler property with historic use as a farm is being retained by the housing authority for sale or lease to someone who wishes to farm, perhaps under a community supported agriculture plan through which community members purchase in advance shares of annual farm production.

These collaborations are possible largely because the people involved met and worked with each other over the initial 18 months under the leadership of MDI Tomorrow, at a time before any specific “solution” had been proposed. For instance, a proposal to develop housing on the Pooler Farm in the early stages might have drawn criticism from the environmental community regarding wetlands. Instead, the partners were drawn into looking at the opportunity with each able to suggest a way for their interests to be met in a collaborative project.

In short, as a result of the MDI Tomorrow process, the island has significantly increased its capacity to address the housing issue, increased public awareness about the importance of the issue, and engaged other local groups and community leaders in the creative process to close the \$20 million housing affordability gap for current and future members of the community workforce.

MDI Tomorrow runs parallels to local government

One of the persistent questions about the MDI Tomorrow process had to do with its relation to local government. “How will any of this make a difference if the elected officials of the four towns don’t actively participate? Won’t they just ignore all this talk about a “preferred future” and your policy recommendations?” asked more than one skeptic.

While these and other questions were actively discussed by the steering committee, the group came to understand that in small rural towns, the elected officials and planning board members are mostly fully occupied in their current roles. The steering committee would need to keep town officials abreast of the work of MDI Tomorrow and invited to all public meetings, but would not expect them to participate in force. And because each town is charged (by statute) to create town comprehensive plans, MDI Tomorrow would be able to provide data and direction for the island as a whole, without taking away any local prerogatives for comprehensive planning of town infrastructure, services, and land use ordinances.

Steering committee members went to each town and met with representative groups of elected officials and town staff to outline the intent and process, indicating that MDI Tomorrow was running parallel to and supportive of the individual efforts of towns. Steering committee members were careful to state that the vision of the future included four distinct, vibrant and effective town governments who collaborated with one another when and where that made sense to citizens.

Following these initial meetings, members of the steering committee reported to town officials by including them on general email distribution lists and with periodic briefings at meetings of the MDI League of Towns, comprised of town managers and the superintendent of Acadia National Park. In two of the four towns, officials have brought forward recommendations for land use ordinance changes that benefit community housing and protection of open space and wetlands. Voters have approved these changes,

and MDI Tomorrow is credited with helping raise awareness about the issues and policy solutions.

How did it really work? Structure, Role of University of Maine Cooperative Extension and Financial Support for the MDI Tomorrow Process

As noted, the steering committee for MDI Tomorrow was initially comprised of staff members of established non-profit organizations: Friends of Acadia, College of the Atlantic, the Jackson Laboratory, MDI Hospital (through its grant funded Healthy Acadia Coalition), the Harbor House Community Center, and Maine Coast Heritage Trust (a statewide land trust with a significant MDI presence and during the first year, provided a co-chair to the steering committee), and University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Each organization saw how the work of MDI Tomorrow would contribute significantly to their own missions and visions of success. Each therefore “contributed” staff time to coordination of the overall process, as well as to work on one or more issues covered by their organizational mission.

Later, when issue groups gave way to projects that emerged out of community conferences, additional volunteers from the projects were added to the steering committee to assure liaison and coordination.

University of Maine Cooperative Extension provided significant creative and logistical support for the process. A county extension faculty member (an experienced community development practitioner who had lived on Mount Desert Island for thirty years, and who had earlier volunteered on a local planning board, town council and hospital board) served as overall coordinator. An administrative assistant served as a communication link for the email list-serv (by convention, all minutes and agendas of all steering committee and working groups were sent to the administrative assistant, who forwarded them on to an comprehensive email list maintained by Cooperative Extension. Every participant in MDI Tomorrow who wished to could keep abreast of work in all areas... a transparent process.

Cooperative Extension helped maintain and improve the project website (www.mditomorrow.org) and, as needed, served as fiscal agent for specific grants or gifts. This role was played, as well, by most of the non-profit sponsors, depending on the project and alignment with mission.

Each non-profit sponsor was encouraged to seek funds to support specific projects or steps in the overall process. An initial grant of \$5000 from Maine Community Foundation helped establish the website (and served as an endorsement for a variety of other foundations). By 2004, the group had received financial support totaling some \$50,000, including funds from the Shelby Cullom Davis Foundation, Surdna Foundation and the David Rockefeller Foundation. Those funds helped with the costs of the three community conferences, the University of Maine survey, writing and publication of the final report and other aspects of the process. Local banks and businesses helped

underwrite cost of the community conferences, and participants provided nominal registration fees.

Over forty organizations and agencies were recognized for their contributions to the process in the newspaper supplement report to the community.

When asked recently to reflect on what value the MDI Tomorrow process held for them, steering committee members spoke of the relationships and trust that had developed among the group. They mentioned how rare it was to know people in other institutions and other community sectors, much less to collaborate with them. They cited new partnerships, mutual support in seeking outside funding for projects, new perspectives often missing from disciplines whose knowledge and funding are said to reside in individual “silos”. Specifically, they spoke of the shift occurring within the land conservation organizations on Mount Desert Island, as they partner with new interests to meet additional need for community housing with less impact on land, water, habitat and open-space resources. They noted the collaboration among community recreation centers and transportation resources to provide alternatives to adults and teens in individual cars, shuttling back and forth from high school and community events and homes. All these were the result of working together, holding all the community’s interconnected issues up for examination and engagement at once, and not in isolation.

Qualitative Evaluation of Process

In the spring of 2003, as part of a course on community development taught by the author at College of the Atlantic, students evaluated MDI Tomorrow against a series of factors known to generate successful community building.²

They concluded that MDI Tomorrow demonstrated the following strengths:

- **Communication** to the general public, stakeholders, and citizen participants was effective through the use of partnerships with two local newspapers and a state-wide daily, an email list-serve reaching over 300 participants, community meetings and conferences, and issue and project groups that were open to everyone. All these activities lead to high **community awareness** of the effort;
- **Broad vision/narrow focus** allowed the group to involve many and empower them to be active in projects of most interest;
- **Focus on process/product** allowed progress on individual issues as well as expanded community capacity to deal with important issues;
- **Motivation stemmed from community members**, some of whom were also organizational leaders with high collaboration skills;
- **Flexibility of process** allowed the direction to change according to circumstance and opportunity;
- **Understanding of local cultures** meant that there were fewer conflicts

² See **Community Building**, Amherst Wilder Foundation , 1997. (ISBN 0-940069-12-1)

- between the process and the way things were done; and
- **Professionalism** kept the process from getting mired in pettiness and personalities.

Key weaknesses cited by students include:

- **Widespread participation**, while a goal, has not been achieved, in part, because few working people can participate in day-time meetings;
- **Community building skills training** is needed to create leadership and community capacity for the future; and
- **Lack of perceived benefit** to some residents may get in the way of participation.

Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

There is enthusiasm among the steering committee and participants for this process, even though it seems to take two years to frame the issues and gain shared visions for the future. Those who participated in 1987-1991 round of MDI Tomorrow recall the satisfaction in seeing the results of a successful community-wide process. Those who are new to the island were attracted to the recent process by their desire to connect to the island as a whole community. Both groups seem to operate out of a sense that the future is important and that by acting together they can influence that future.

But challenges remain. As we look around the table we see familiar faces and miss others in the business community, in local government and those who have less economic status or formal education. The communities of MDI are becoming slightly more diverse, with three primary groups to bring together: natives, long-term residents who are none-the-less still “from away” and a fresh crop of newcomers (who are generally well to do, well educated and have time and experience to invest). The first two groups have shared appreciation for the way things get done on MDI, if not always for each other; but the third group has less patience and is viewed as suspect by the first two groups. And, as always, we will need to invent or discover ways to attend to the views of all members of the community. Class, income and educational differences create barriers that are difficult to overcome.

Community issues, including the search for balanced economic development, are more complex, which make it all the more important to work at the systems level for solutions. Difficult issues like health care coverage and affordable housing stem from our devotion to capitalism and voters unease with the notion that health and housing should be basic human rights, subsidized in some way. Other issues, like development sprawl require dialogue over public and private rights. And what about “carrying capacity”? If residents find consensus that water supply, sewage, roads and parking (to say nothing of the “experience” of living near or visiting Maine’s classic resort and Acadia National Park) are overtaxed by too many people in the height of summer, will they find tools to limit development of new hotel rooms and all the attendant services? Will expansion of tourism into the shoulder seasons bring benefits or add to stresses?

At the heart of the process is our attempt to link the many components of a vibrant, healthy year-round community, so that success in one arena will encourage success in another. Everyone acknowledges that housing is key to preventing the “hollowing out” of the community and development of the economy. Jackson Laboratory, the largest employer on the island, wishes to expand, and knows that it cannot do so without addressing the housing needs of at least some of its research and production staff. The Hinckley boatyard acknowledges that many of its employees commute one way for up to an hour. The largest locally owned bank located a new customer service center in Ellsworth in recognition that it would draw employees mostly from “off island”. And a local building contractor fears that, unless the island secures and keeps affordable a core of 400-500 housing units, the island towns will, over time, lose their ability to fill the variety of public and non-profit volunteer roles in schools libraries, fire departments and church committees. As the number of retirees without roots in the community grows, and the school populations shrink, will town meetings continue to support local education? What will community life be like without celebration of its youngest residents as they make their way through school, and participate in athletic competition and development of their artistic talents?

We hope that the advent of email, interactive use of the World Wide Web and advanced Geographic Information Systems will allow us to be both more responsive and more proactive as we continue the current round of community building and futuring. But we know that a pot-luck dessert and discussion is the way to connect with people’s hearts and minds. And we know that connection in the aisles of local supermarkets and “letters to the editor” are part of the glue that assures neighbor will help neighbor when help is needed. We count on outcomes of the 2001-2004 round of MDI Tomorrow to dissuade some of the naysayers and make it easier to attract partners and funding for projects. And we remain inspired by the connection to place that so easily translates into action on the part of hundreds of our fellow citizens, young and old, native and newcomer.

In the end, we know we are teaching people how to engage with one another to resolve issues critical to the future of vibrant, healthy and year-round communities, those communities people say they want. This is the essential capacity of any community, and we have no doubt that processes like MDI Tomorrow inform, test and invigorate that capacity.

Reports Cited

Shaping Our Future: MDI Tomorrow Progress Report to Community, a supplement to The Bar Harbor Times and Mount Desert Islander newspapers, June 10, 1994, edited by Cheryl Curtis

MDI Community Housing Study Executive Summary, published by Island Housing Trust, 2004. (PO Box 851, Mount Desert, Maine 04660)

Other Resources

Friends of Acadia <http://www.friendsofacadia.org>

Maine Coast Heritage Trust <http://www.mcht.org/home.html>

Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce <http://www.barharbor.org/>

Town of Bar Harbor <http://www.ci.bar-harbor.me.us/>

College of the Atlantic <http://www.coa.edu/>

University of Maine Cooperative Extension <http://www.umext.maine.edu/>
and

Mount Desert Island Tomorrow <http://www.mditomorrow.org/>