

Frequently Asked Question about the Village Rural Project of the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee

Please come to the CPIC's second forum on October 25, at the Town Office at 7:00pm

Is Harpswell going to change in the next 20-50 years?

Change! Very few people in Harpswell want our town to change. New residents, fishermen, old timers, artists, summer people, year round people like Harpswell the way it is or perhaps the way it was. As someone said, "We have a treasure here. We don't want to lose it."

Unfortunately, Harpswell will change. Around 50 new houses a year are expected to be built here during the next 50 years; that's 500 more houses by 2021. It could be more if climate encourages people to move north. Harpswell is a very appealing place with its very low taxes, shoreland, and fishing community. If we continue on our current path with our current ordinances, the houses will be built largely on one or two-acre lots throughout Harpswell. These could be relatively high end homes since one or two acres can be expensive. With these lots, there would be little casual contact between neighbors, and any feeling of community would further dissipate. The expense and distance to neighbors could discourage families from settling in Harpswell. Wildlife habitat would disappear even faster. Routes 123 and 24 would be lined with houses instead of trees, making the drive from Harpswell Neck to Cundy's Harbor just like driving between two towns anywhere else in the United States.

Is there any alternative to this scenario?

Fortunately, the Comprehensive Plan and the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee (CPIC) does have an alternative, which it thinks is better. It is called the Village Rural Project which the committee has been working on for a long time with the help of consultants hired by the town. The idea of the plan is simple. In order to protect the rural and community character of Harpswell, the CPIC suggests we concentrate the incoming growth into four "village growth areas" plus the town center. This plan would leave the rural areas rural, as well as lower the lot sizes in village growth areas, and therefore the cost. This would encourage families to move in and community spirit to develop among neighbors.

Where did the growth and rural area plan come from?

The legislature passed the Growth Management Act in 1988 to foster the protection of Maine's rural areas by identifying growth areas (or ³village areas²) in Maine towns where new building is to be encouraged. The Act seeks to preserve community character and prevent sprawl and its accompanying increased infrastructure costs by encouraging more compact development in chosen locations.

What is the CPIC?

This committee was appointed by the selectmen after the 1995 Comprehensive Plan was approved at Town Meeting to implement the Comprehensive Plan. Its function is to put into practice the Future Land Use Plan outlined in the Comprehensive Plan, calling for setting aside enough undeveloped land close to existing built-up areas to accommodate inevitable growth over the coming 3-5 decades while maintaining the community character townspeople indicate they are anxious to preserve.

What are the Village Growth Areas?

The CPIC was given 12 suggestions of growth areas by the consultants. The CPIC then chose five areas using the following criteria. The areas should be near traditional growth areas, but have enough land that is developable. They should have some amenities nearby, such as stores, churches, halls, etc. They should have acceptable soils and enough ground water, and a lack of constraints, such as steep slopes or wetlands. They also should be walkable. Then, we shared our choices with the participants who came to the first forum. On the basis of all this, the committee selected South Harpswell (the area around West Harpswell School), West Harpswell (the area around Mitchell Field), Harpswell Center, Cundy's Harbor (area north of Cundy's Harbor), and East Harpswell (area around Oakledge Rd and south). Of course, none of these areas fulfilled all our criteria, but these came closest.

How will Village Growth Area be different?

The biggest difference will be lot size. Much denser development will be permitted in growth areas than the current two acres or

even one acre. How much denser will be decided after the next forum on October 25th at 7:00 at the Town Office. Less setback from the road will be permitted. We hope a park or open space will be included. In general, however, there are no restrictions that are stricter than on housing now. Our hope is that they do not turn out looking like a development.

How will Village Growth Areas be better than the scenario described in the first paragraph?

Village Growth Areas will be better for the property owner because the smaller lot size will allow the owner to sell more lots and houses for any given amount of property. If he had five acres, at a lot size of 2 acres, he could only sell 2 lots and 2 houses.

Under the Village Rural Project he could sell 5 lots or even 10 lots, depending on what the CPIC and Selectmen decide.

Growth areas could be better for the buyers because they could get the land a little cheaper. They would have neighbors who might have children. There might be a greater feeling of community. There might be a store or stores to walk to buy milk or products that there is a demand for. There might be a park where their children could play with other children.

Growth areas would be better for everyone in Harpswell because the rural areas would be preserved, so it would be a pleasure to walk, bicycle or drive between villages. There would be greater diversity of people in Harpswell. People who work in Harpswell might be able to live in Harpswell. There would be room for wildlife to continue to share our space. It could help our schools. We might be eligible for state and federal grants. We hope that Village Growth Areas would go a long way to keeping Harpswell the treasure that it is, and not losing it.

If a property owner lives in a growth area, will the owner be allowed to opt out of being in a Growth Area?

Yes, but it might not make sense, because the owner would be able to do everything in a growth area that they could without growth areas. They could still have lots that are 2 acres. The Village Growth Project would only increase the possibilities of what the owner could do with the property.

What about water and septic in the Village Growth Areas?

Good question! There are many possibilities. All housing in the Growth Areas will have to meet the same water and septic requirements that are in the current ordinances. Certainly, there are places in Harpswell that are more densely developed than we expect Growth Areas to be, and we have to solve the water and septic problems there also. On the other hand, there is new technology that makes it possible to put septic tanks in smaller areas. Also, there is the possibility of sharing the “good” spots for septic and water with others in the community.

When will the CPIC work on standards for our rural areas?

Once the growth areas are adopted, the CPIC will work with citizens to plan ways to preserve Harpswell's rural character.