



Synopsis of August 22 public event

The Harpswell Affordable Housing Working Group, along with consultant Ivy Vann, conducted an interactive event at the Harpswell Community School on August 22 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Approximately 60 residents participated; the participants were primarily older people; many of them said they were retired.

The purpose of the meeting was two-fold: to encourage residents to think about housing in Harpswell and let the committee know what the participants believe to be the issues around housing in town; and to encourage those present to tell the committee what action, if any, they believe the town should take around housing issues.

Introduction

Participants were seated at rectangular tables with between four and seven people to a table, along with one person to act as a scribe. Participants began the evening by introducing themselves to their tablemates and talking about why they thought it was important to come out to the event.

Not all tables recorded their answers to this question but among those that did, common responses included interest in the town, concern that their children be able to afford to live in Harpswell, personal experience with the difficulty of finding housing. People also mentioned the trend of the town becoming a de facto retirement community and their concern for the future of the community as a lively place, a multi-generational place

Many participants noted that they or someone they knew had not been able to find affordable housing. Concerns for younger families and, in particular, fishing families also contributed to their willingness to have this conversation, they said.

People were also concerned about the need to protect natural resources, a theme that reappears in many responses to later questions.

Talk About Your Current Housing

After the introduction participants were asked to think about their current housing situation and how well it worked for them. Some people said their current situation was perfect but not by any means all. People mentioned that their houses were too small, but that they were grateful to have them; others said their house was too big and hard to maintain. Others mentioned that they worried about the lack of services such as health care, groceries, and schools. Maintenance and utility costs came up as well.

Complaints about change surfaced in this conversation: changes in neighborhoods with the addition of more short-term rentals, more traffic, and again concerns about the availability of water; concern over how close new neighbors were to them. The prospect of sea-level rise and its effect on residents was also mentioned. Several noted that while their current house worked now, it was not ideal for aging at home, which fed directly into the next question.

Think about your housing in 10 years

Here residents really opened up about their fears for the future. More than half the responders acknowledged that their current housing was not going to work when they were 10 years older. Stairs were mentioned more than once, along with the reality that they would not be able to stay without considerable assistance. A few people said they had purchased their current house specifically as a place to age.

People also talked about the burden of maintaining their current housing and how difficult it was to get help, even if they could afford to pay for it. Some suggested that a list of property management services and reliable contractors would be useful.

The issues of maintenance brought up the idea of specialized senior housing for some tables; participants noted that finding a small, more accessible place in Harpswell now was nearly impossible and several stories of people moving out of Harpswell because they couldn't find affordable, accessible housing were shared. Some mentioned that they worried about living alone as they aged.

This is where conversations about the size of yards and their maintenance happened: "I don't see myself taking care of three acres in ten years."

Concerns about transportation were also mentioned: there is no bus service to speak of and when people lose the ability to drive they also lose the ability to stay in their current housing situation.

What kind of housing do other people need?

With this question we asked the participants to think about people who might not be in the room. Not surprisingly, given the demographics of those present, many comments were about the difficulties of aging. We also heard about renters, the difficulty finding an affordable long-term rental, and the fear that the rent would increase beyond what they could pay.

Several people had stories of younger family members who had moved away from Harpswell: some moved because they couldn't find appropriate housing but some said they had moved because they wanted more of a neighborhood than was available here.

The lack of smaller units or shared housing for either young people or old people was noted. We also heard lots of housing stories: about people who had to move when their partner died because they couldn't afford the house on their own; fishermen and lobstermen who couldn't find anything they could afford year-round; and sternmen who couldn't afford anything at all.

The common consensus was that Harpswell was becoming unaffordable for people whose families had lived here for many years. The irregular incomes of some workers, such as

lobstermen, fishermen, and outdoor workers in general were noted as problematic, since the rent doesn't go down when the income isn't coming in.

While it was not mentioned in the report-out from each table, close analysis of the response sheets shows that more than one person noted that they did not want new people to come to Harpswell, that any housing should be focused on those that were already here.

What should Harpswell do about housing?

Participants had a number of suggestions about what Harpswell could do to ease the housing situation. Encouraging Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs); incentivizing the creation of long-term rentals; and somehow managing or decreasing the number of short-term rentals were a common theme. Shared housing solutions were suggested as well as cluster subdivisions, where each house used less land and the larger portion was kept in conservation.

Many respondents talked about water. There is a wide perception that the water situation in Harpswell is dire and that adding any housing will exacerbate the issue. People suggested that the town teach people about water conservation.

More choices in housing generally were mentioned frequently: ADUs (again), small multi-family buildings, tiny houses, and shared housing were all mentioned several times. Replicating the existing workforce housing community was widely supported. Adding more housing in existing villages was suggested, too, and people talked about the need for small communities and neighborhoods.

Economic and demographic diversity came up as highly desirable. Harking back to the conversation on how well their housing would suit them in ten years people mentioned the need for a support system for older residents, which included housing affordable housing for caregivers.

Changing the town's regulations to allow more housing choice was suggested more than once as a way to improve things.

And what else?

Before the gathering closed participants were asked what else should the Affordable Housing Working Group know that hadn't already been said.

The first comment was a question about how residents could get the town to make the changes that had been discussed this evening. The path the ordinance change was described and attendees were urged to remain involved and support any suggested changes. The fact that the

cluster ordinance has only been used once was mentioned with the suggestion that the planning board take a look at it.

People brought up water again, as a barrier to increased housing. “More housing brings more bodies.” Water has been a consistent issue at all the public events. Unfortunately the public feels that the committee isn’t taking it seriously, and perhaps this report will allay that fear.

The suggestion of a housing trust, which has been done in some Maine towns, was another suggestion.

There were concerns over school enrollment and how low it had become, which affects whether young families want to live in Harpswell.

A commercial fisherman said that the only reason he was able to buy a house in Harpswell was because his landlord was willing to sell it at a price he could afford.

After the fact

Harpswell’s town planner asked table leaders for their thoughts on the event in an email after the fact. Of the responses, more than one said they would like more information about what the committee is hearing, not what they’re proposing, but what they’ve heard. Perhaps making this report readily available will help.

Monique Coombs brought up the idea that perhaps making it easy to live in Harpswell is the problem. As a planner, that one is hard: if we make it easy for fishermen and families to afford housing how do we keep that housing only for them? Land banks, housing with income restrictions, housing tied to particular industries are solutions other places have tried.

Interestingly at least two table leaders said their tables were opposed to affordable housing in Harpswell, something that is not reflected in the notes from each table. Ivy Vann plans to follow up with Monique and Jane Covey, who also mentioned it, and see what is to be learned.

Conclusions

The concentration on problems and solutions for the elderly is not surprising, given the demographic composition of the attendees. By and large people agreed that there was a housing problem and there were a few suggestions that seemed to have general support. Accessory Dwelling Units, small multi-family buildings, shared housing, and long term rentals seem to be the most fruitful paths forward at this time.

At the same time, concerns over water availability are going to continue to be a big part of this conversation and those fears will need to be addressed to assure that the town as a whole will vote to make the necessary zoning changes to allow more housing choice.

And the final word should go to the gentleman who reminded the group that the town had made the decision to require two acre lots: "We made that choice and we can unmake it."