

# A Vision for Chebeague?

## Results of the Chebeague Island Comprehensive Planning survey

A Comprehensive Plan is intended to be a useful guide to a Town about its direction over about a 10 year period. This is the Town of Chebeague Island’s first Comprehensive Plan and it comes early enough in our experience as a Town to perhaps provide real guidance to Town officials and citizens about directions for Town policies and ordinances that are different from what we had as part of Cumberland.

Two keys to doing this are (1) understanding what issues and directions most people agree on so that detailed policies can be developed to see that they happen. (2) The other side of this is to identify issues that are important to the future of the Town but on which people in the Town disagree. These are areas where the plan is only a starting place for further discussion about policies or ordinances.

In January the Comprehensive Planning Committee sent out a survey to all the people listed in the *Chebeague Directory*, plus owners of property who are not listed, asking them what they would like the Town of Chebeague Island to be like “for future generations”. The survey respondents and the results will be described in more detail below, but an overview of the results will give you a start on understanding the details.

The last question on the survey asked what, of all the topics they had already been asked about, they thought were the three most important for the future of the Town. These were scored 3 for the highest and 1 for the lowest and these scores were added together for each issue. The scores and issue ranks are given in Table 1. Year-round and summer people had slightly but not significantly different rankings. Such marginal differences between the two groups were fairly typical of the results in general. When there were interesting differences, they are reported.

Table 1: Top Priorities for all Respondents

	Score	Rank
Education	193	1
Economic dev/jobs	139	2
Access to mainland	127	3
Affordability	113	4
Character of community	98	5
Preserve open space	89	6
Need young families	64	7
Non-profit services	59	8

Education tops the list for everyone – after all, the possible closing of the island school was the trigger point and the rallying cry for secession. Transportation to the mainland ranks second for year-round people, many of whose livelihoods depend on it. But overall, encouraging economic development and the creation of jobs was the second priority. The need to keep and attract new young families who would have children in the school ranked seventh overall. But another aspect of attracting young families – having housing on the island that they can afford – ranked fourth. Two items related to keeping what the island has already – its sense of community and its open space – ranked fifth and sixth. The importance of maintaining the island’s range of non-profit services, which ranked eighth, is also one element of what creates the sense of community.

### How was the survey done?

The survey was designed by a subcommittee of the CPC, with help from the Town’s consultants who decided that the most informative way to ask the question of what people wanted the future town to be like was to ask them general questions about particular topic areas such as transportation, land use, and Town infrastructure, and get their open-ended answers. So the questions described the present situation for each

topic and asked how the respondent thought it should work “for the next generation”.

This strategy had the advantage of not having people respond to standardized questions that may not really be relevant to what they think themselves. They said what they had to say about the topic. Some answers were quite short, others were fairly extended essays. The disadvantage of this, however, is that it is much more work for the respondent to come up with their own ideas than to respond to standard questions. This probably deterred some people from answering at all, and a few who did complained about getting tired. The analysis of responses to open ended questions is also more interpretive and less objective, though every effort was made to code similar answers similarly and to preserve the wide variety of responses, though this is significantly lost in a summary like this one.<sup>1</sup>

The survey was sent to 834 individuals listed in the Chebeague Directory and Town property records. Of this population, 32 percent were year-round residents, 55 percent were summer people and 13 percent were property owners only. In the end, 298 people returned their paper survey or answered on-line. Of these, 89 or 30 percent were year-round residents, 171 or 57 percent were summer people, and one was a property owner only, who said s/he didn't know enough about the island to really respond and was not included in the analysis.

The 89 year-round residents who answered were at least<sup>2</sup> a third of the year-round adult population. They had lived on Chebeague for an average of 29 years, though 10 people said they were “lifelong” residents without saying how

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<sup>1</sup> If you want more detailed information and many more quotes from the survey, a longer report is available at the Library or on the Town website:

[www.townofchebeagueisland.org/comprehensiveplan](http://www.townofchebeagueisland.org/comprehensiveplan)

<sup>2</sup> 37 respondents did not realize that the on-line version of the questionnaire had an additional section of demographic questions at the end, so it was impossible to tell whether they were year-round or summer people. They are included in reported totals.

long that was. Almost a third worked on Chebeague or in its waters, with a quarter owning their own business. Eighteen percent commute to jobs on the mainland, and 15 percent do both. More than a third – 36 percent – were retired or unemployed.

Younger people with children were more likely to answer the survey than older ones without. Even so, almost three quarters had no children at home, while 3 percent had preschool-age children, 13 percent had children in the Chebeague School and 10 percent had children in school on the mainland.

Since 63 percent of Chebeague's houses are owned by summer people, having at least 57 percent of the survey responses come from summer people is quite reasonable. Two thirds were in the workforce and the other third retired or not employed. They have come to the island for an average of 42 years, plus 15 people who said they had come “all their lives”.

Up-coming sections will emphasize areas of agreement and disagreement.

## Education



The TOCI School System was well-regarded by people who answered the survey. Almost a quarter of all respondents said that the education of the future should be similar to the way it is now. A fifth saw it as helping to keep and attract young families to the island.

*I believe that the island school is a gift that we should recognize and value. The children*

*at the island school receive a good education and have a lot of authentic learning experiences, due in no small part to the role that volunteers play at the school. We need to be sure that we allocate funds adequately for the school, for continued use of technology, for good quality teachers, and for school staff to meet the needs of the children.*

However, fewer year-round than summer respondents said explicitly that they thought the present system of having the pre-K – 5 grades on the island, and 6 -12 on the mainland works well. Eighteen percent of all respondents wanted to have more grades on the island – at a minimum 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and at a maximum, having the Chebeague School go through high school.

Two issues were mentioned only by year-round residents because they have only recently been discussed. One was the issue of where Chebeague students will go on the mainland when the initial 7-year arrangement with SAD 51 ends. Here people were divided, with 15 percent saying the kids should go to Yarmouth and 11 percent saying they should have school choice on the mainland. The other current issue is the idea of building a School-to-Rec Center connector.

### **Economic Development and Jobs**

A basic ten to 20 percent of all respondents thought the diverse mix of businesses in the economy now is a strength. Sixteen percent said they thought fishing should still be central in the future economy. But 15 percent of year-round people also wanted to see more job creation. Of those who specifically wrote about more jobs, a fifth thought of telecommuting as something that could work well on Chebeague. Others mentioned island arts and crafts and agriculture.

*We should try to develop some island based business enterprise that would provide year round employment at a variety of skill levels (management, sales, product creation, shipping, etc.) and perhaps with flexible schedules to accommodate child care. With internet sales and the presence of our post*

*office there are surely craft or food oriented businesses we could undertake (look at Stonewall Kitchen in York as a stellar example of doing something with very little to start!)*

The main difference between year-round and summer people was in how they wrote about the “summer” or “tourist” economy. More than a third of the summer people thought the vacation economy is as important to the community as fishing or an even more important driver. They suggested promoting it more, if carefully, with eco-tourism and/or more day-trippers.



But the problem is that a summer economy is a summer economy – the work is part-time and the pay is often poor. Twenty percent of year-round residents wrote about the need for more year-round jobs, mentioning the Boatyard , and non-profits as good examples.

A third of summer people thought that the Town could play a role in stimulating economic development compared with only 9 percent of year-round people. This may simply reflect Chebeague’s experience as part of Cumberland, while other communities around the country may play a more active role in this area.

### **Transportation to the Mainland**

More than half of the respondents said that the present system with both CTC and CBL is working. It wasn’t seen as perfect. The two major issues that were raised were parking on

Chebeague and the cost of transportation. While ferry transportation is still a central issue for Chebeaguers, it is not the grinding worry that it was in 2000 as the lease on the Blanchard lot ran out. In this survey respondents were more likely to mention the beneficial effect of not having access to the island be *too easy*.

*The island needs to be accessible to a wide range and age of people and the CTC most easily fulfills this role. The parking fees and cumbersome nature of the whole transportation issue is fair and needed and helps Chebeague keep its rural character and only those who care enough to make the trip will come. We want folks who care. :-)*



Now the focus is on what to do about the parking on Chebeague – half the respondents discussed it. Of those 116 people, a quarter recommended moving the ferry to Sunset Landing, an idea that has been around since the 1990s. Forty two percent suggested having bus service to the ferries, either from a satellite parking lot or by a regular, round-the-island bus. Year-round residents mentioned both of these alternatives somewhat more than summer people.

The cost of the CTC ferry-bus-parking system was cited as a problem by 30 percent of year-round residents and 20 percent of summer ones. Some particularly noted the social implications of the cost. As a year-round resident wrote:

*I wish transportation could be cheaper. I know it takes a lot to run such a business,*

*but more people would come if it wasn't as high. It's less embarrassing to meet old friends in Town than have them come here.*

Government subsidies were mentioned as a possibility by ten percent of respondents, about half of whom saw this as a subsidy from the Town. The idea of having the Town explore the issue of taking over the CTC was supported by 18 percent of year-round residents and 6 percent of summer ones.

### **The Character of the Community**

Respondents were enthusiastic about the special qualities of the Chebeague community – caring, inclusive, simple in the best sort of way, with many generations of heritage. A third simply said to keep it as it is.

***WHY CHANGE ANYTHING?  
CHEBEAGUE'S SIMPLICITY,  
CHARACTER, BEAUTY, DIVERSITY AND  
SENSE OF COMMUNITY CAN'T BE  
BEAT! LET'S PROTECT IT FOR THE  
FUTURE GENERATIONS.***

About ten percent said they thought that having many non-profit organizations and a high level of community participation was an important aspect of this sense of community.

*The single most important thing in maintaining Chebeague's unique culture is participation in community at high levels.*

### **Land Use and Open Space**

The single most common response on the question about land use, mentioned by 41 percent of all respondents, was the preservation of open space.

*It would be nice to leave some land undeveloped.*

Access to the ocean, the Town's largest open space and a central part of its economy, as well,



was the second most common response, mentioned by 25 percent of respondents. In both cases these were mentioned more often by year-round than by summer residents.

About half the people who answered wrote about the need to balance land development with land preservation. They knew development was inevitable, but they hoped it would not occur at the expense of the island's natural resources and rural character.

*No matter where you are, the balance between development and preservation is challenging. I believe any future "growth" must be managed with our natural resources and carrying capacity of the island in mind. Water is the number one resource we must preserve and use wisely. Open land for farming will be increasingly important. And the natural beauty of the island is part of the reason we all love Chebeague and must be preserved. Having said all that, I am a strong believer in private property rights. I think that planning must occur within the framework of preserving and enhancing "community life" and that personal property rights must be upheld within the context of personal responsibility to that life.*

Again, 41 percent wanted to keep development at the low densities that are characteristic of the island now. But 15 percent said that they thought higher density development, or cluster developments with open space, would be good if they helped to preserve open space.

### **Future Population and the Cost of Living**

Many people wrote that they liked the current, diverse mix of ages and incomes. But 37 percent said that it was important to work to keep existing young families and encourage more to come to live on the island. This was also among the 8 highest priorities mentioned by respondents:

*I would like the current levels maintained, with perhaps more families with young children. Young families tend to invest themselves in building community, and they have infectious energy and positive attitudes. Not to say others don't, but I think the young families are effective engines.*

Almost half the respondents identified the high cost of living on the island as a problem for attracting young families. In the land use section 18 percent mentioned the need for affordable housing and this ranked as the fourth of the eight overall priorities.

*It seems obvious that on a median household income below statewide average, it would be crazy to assume Chebeague could attract many "average" families. Housing, land, transportation, school complications are all working against the average family trying to make a go on Chebeague. Young adults must either get very creative in their income generation and budget well, or have access to more than the average year-round income.*

### **What Role Should the Town Play in the Community?**

Several questions asked about the role of the Town – one asked about what Town facilities and infrastructure people wanted. Another asked about how much regulation, and a third about the balance between services provided by non-profits and those provided by the Town.

These questions brought out the difference between low-tax, small government conservatives and activist liberals who wanted

the Town to play a larger role in providing services and shaping the future. But these two groups were balanced by a large “moderate middle” who basically wanted the island to maintain its current character, but with gradual improvements, some of which would be done by the Town.

Very few people said they wanted **no** additional Town facilities or services, but the things that people said they did want were somewhat of a surprise, and show how much broader the idea of infrastructure has become. Not a surprise was the fact that 19 percent said they wanted the roads repaired. The most gentle comment was:

*The roads need to be upgraded - can we afford to do this?*

Beyond roads, over 40 percent said they were interested in some form of alternative energy generation, with 24 percent preferring wind turbines. Another 18 percent said they wanted better internet service, clashing a bit with the 8 percent who said islanders should support Chebeague.net. And 16 percent said they would like to have better cell-phone service on the island.

*In the coming era with its focus on energy independence, environmental protections, and need for state of the art communications, Chebeaguers have a great opportunity to exercise leadership in all three areas.*

When asked about how much regulation and law enforcement the Town should provide, 22 percent said that the amount of regulation was about right now, and 11 percent said they would like as little regulation as possible. Some ambivalence about this was captured by this person:

*[Current regulation] seems reasonable to me. Chebeague is nice because it is more relaxed than other places. I'd hate to lose that, but we must protect safety and the environment.*

Small numbers of people had specific comments about police, code enforcement, the harbormaster, and parking and traffic enforcement – about 3:2 for and against.

Finally, one of the questions asked how the responsibility for community services should be divided up between the Town and the various island non-profits. A quarter said to continue the existing services and 11 percent said explicitly that they thought the current balance between Town and non-profit services was good.



About 10 percent said the Town was already spending too much on services or should not take on any more.

***SHOULD NOT HAVE TO SUPPORT MORE SERVICES OR ORGANIZATIONS THAN WE ARE DOING PRESENTLY. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.***

On the other side about 16 percent said the Town should provide at least the same amount of support or more to the Library, the Recreation Center and the Health Clinic<sup>3</sup>. Smaller numbers suggested The Commons, the Historical Society and open space.

*I support having a millage for the island non-profits Commons, Health Clinic, Historical Society etc as well as the library*

<sup>3</sup> The Health Clinic actually gets no support from the Town, but people who wanted the same or more support clearly wanted more money for this service.

*and rec center. All the island organizations spend a tremendous amount of time on fundraising and most of it ends up being targeted back at islanders.*

Only very small numbers of people were in favor of having the Town take over and fund any new service. CTC and the Library were the only two mentioned by more than one person.

### **Conclusion**

A final way to look at the overall results of the survey is to look at the top choices for each of the individual survey questions. These suggest that many people don't want things to change from the way they are now:

- Half said the current ferry system is ok.
- A third said to keep the sense of community that exists now.
- A quarter said that existing services should be continued,
- A quarter supported keeping the school system similar to the way it is now.



But respondents were not completely resistant to change, particularly if that change gave them something they thought the island really needed.

- Two fifths wanted more preservation of open space.
- A third wanted easier access to the ferry on the island:
  - One fifth suggested an island bus
  - One eighth suggested moving the ferry to Sunset Landing.
- More than a third thought the island should

attract more young families

What everyone agreed on was that the island that they knew should be preserved for future generations to enjoy.

If you have comments on or questions about this report, please call, email or write to any of the members of the Town of Chebeague Island Comprehensive Planning Committee:

- Sam Ballard
- Sam Birkett
- Leila Bisharat
- Erno Bonebakker
- Ernie Burgess
- Donna Damon
- Mabel Doughty
- Bob Earnest
- Jane Frizzell
- Beth Howe
- Andy LeMaistre
- Peter Olney
- Al Traina
- Vail Traina
- Carol White

This Newsletter and a longer, more detailed discussion of the survey with more quotations from responses can be found on the Town's website: [www.townofchebeagueisland.org](http://www.townofchebeagueisland.org). Go to Comprehensive Plan.

*Photos by Claire Ross, Cathy MacNeil and Bev Johnson*

