

A. VISION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The town of Cooper chose to prepare its first Comprehensive Plan in the wake of a decision by voters to retain an organized, Town Meeting/Selectmen form of government. A move by the town to deorganize was met, in 2006, by resistance from the legislature that included a directive to the town to meet with adjoining towns to seek efficiencies in delivery of local services. Discussions with adjoining towns and with new local leaders led to a decision to use the funds that were already raised for the purpose of exploring deorganization to instead prepare this Comprehensive Plan.

Public Participation Summary

Community members were consulted throughout the process in numerous ways. The Comprehensive Plan Committee is composed of a broad cross section of community interests and walks of life. They met monthly in the Cathance Grange Hall or, when winter weather made use of that building impossible, in the homes of a variety of committee members.

Information about, and input to, the Comprehensive Plan was sought at three large public meetings. These included the Annual Meeting of the Cathance Lake Association, a presentation by staff from the Beginning with Habitat program of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and a Community Visioning meeting. All of these meetings were publicized in the local paper through press releases and paid advertisements. For the community visioning meeting the information inset at right was provided to residents through brightly colored posters and in a town wide post card mailing to all property owners.

Cooper Residents and Property Owners: Come to Help Plan Cooper’s Future	
WHEN:	Thursday September 10 from 6:00 – 8:00 PM
WHERE:	Cathance Grange
WHY:	The Comprehensive Plan Committee needs your input
HOW:	Participate in a 2 hour meeting on the future of Cooper - eat some snacks – win some fuel oil!
Participate and Enter a DRAW to WIN \$100 worth of fuel from the LOCAL vendor of your choice You <u>must participate</u> and be present <u>to WIN</u> Winner to be announced at 8PM September 10th	

In addition a town wide (resident and non-resident) survey was mailed to all property owners that affirmed the open invitation to participate in monthly meetings of the Comprehensive Plan Committee that spanned an 18 month period.

The results of the survey (29.6% response rate) are summarized in Chapter L – Town Survey Results and written comments are reproduced in their entirety in Appendix A – Town Survey and Written Comments. The notes from the community visioning meeting are provided in Appendix B - Community Meeting Summary. Survey input informs policy development in each chapter throughout the document.

A vision statement for the town was generated from the collective input provided by the visioning meeting and the survey, particularly written comments.

Town of Cooper Vision Statement

The town of Cooper envisions a future of slow planned growth that supports agriculture, cottage industry, services, and a store to serve local needs. There will be a community building with modern facilities for gatherings and town affairs. Cathance Lake will retain its pristine water quality with strong stewardship by the town and the lake association and forests will be managed for long term sustainable production.

The primary artery and regional connector road, State Route 191, will be fully constructed to include shoulders and a foundation that supports regional freight traffic. Trails for hiking, ATVs and snowmobiles will be maintained on public and private land with respect for private property owners and connections to networks of trails in the region.

Residential growth will continue with support for private land stewardship, retention of open space around the lake and other sensitive areas including Vining Lake, Mill Pond and the Cranberry Flowage. Cluster subdivision plans and development away from the lakes will be encouraged in an effort to balance an increase in the tax base with protection of lake water quality. Public access to the lake will be maintained.

Second home development will be a strong part of our housing stock and the town will continue to be a bedroom community to other regional centers. We will once again provide a way-station for services at a store on Route 191 that serves travelers and the community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of a Comprehensive Plan is to provide a community with the information and a process to make choices about its future. The town of Cooper has involved its resident and non-resident community members in the development of this plan. It has also made use of extensive resources available through the US Census, several agencies of state government, the Washington County Council of Governments and geographic information system (GIS) mapping. The document will serve the town for a 5 to 10 year time horizon and, as a living document, will be revised and updated as new information and understanding develops. *The following summarizes each section of the document and readers are directed specifically to the Policies and Implementation Strategies section for greater detail about the choices Cooper is making about its future growth and development.*

History

The history of Cooper is based upon the natural resources that drove the local and regional economy, including logging, and more recently, blueberries. Many current residents can trace their families back to the town's early days. Cooper enjoys many of the benefits from our past. It is a small town with a strong sense of community where people look out for one another. The town seeks to maintain a link to its heritage and support for development that retain the scale and appearance of the town as well as preserve its historic character.

Population

The population of Cooper peaked early, in 1840 and then declined until the 1970s. It has increased steadily in the last 30 years. A slight to modest population increase over the next ten-year period is indicated by past trends. However, an adjustment in this upward trend may occur with recent significant increases in the price of fuel and other costs of living as well as the distance of the town of Cooper from medical, dental, retail, educational and other services. Contrary to the trend in Washington County, Cooper had 38 children enrolled in school in the year 2000, a significant increase since 1990. This figure reflects both an increase in elementary and high school enrollment (from 8 in 1990 to 26 in 2000) as well as an increase in post-secondary enrollment (from 5 in 1990 to 12 in 2000). Recent (since 2000) shifts in the number of school aged children indicate a level number of families moving in and out of Cooper. Again, rising fuel costs may force those now commuting to service centers for school and employment to move out of town.

There is a large and growing seasonal population. Like elsewhere in Washington County Cooper's population is aging. The overall age structure is similar and reflects an aging population. The number of households has increased indicative of more retiree, single person families. The town will continue to make available demographic information to residents in particular tracking any the shifts of existing seasonal housing and residents to year-round status.

Natural Resources

Cooper currently offers protection to its natural resources with locally adopted shoreland zoning regulations. These ordinance provisions will be updated to be consistent with the requirements of State and Federal Regulations and reviewed for improvement to specifically protect the lakes in Cooper. The town will continue to cooperate with the many local and regional organizations working to protect the natural resources within and surrounding Cooper including the Dennys and East Machias River Watershed Councils, the Downeast Lakes Land Trust and neighboring communities. Regional efforts will focus on watershed protection, and land conservation.

Economy and Employment

Cooper is a small community primarily dependant on regional sources of employment. Most residents rely on wage and salary income and retirees compose a larger part of the population compared to the county as a whole. The top three sectors of employment for Cooper are 'Education, health and social services'; 'Construction; and 'Manufacturing'. The residents of Cooper have income levels that are higher than residents of Washington County as a whole. However, with the aging of our population, the size the workforce continues to decrease. Living in a rural area limits employment opportunities and increases the costs of commuting to the service centers where many of the newly created jobs are located. Our local government should strive to encourage and maintain appropriate development that will better employ residents. Growth needs to be channeled to areas of town capable of handling development while incurring minimal cost to the municipality.

Housing

Analysis of housing data from the 1980, 1990 and 2000 censuses revealed that the 1990 census significantly undercounted seasonal housing in Cooper. For instance, if one only looks at the change between 1990 and 2000, seasonal units increased by 60 units or 157.9%. However, according to the 1980 census there were 81 seasonal units in Cooper but only 38 seasonal units in the 1990 census. According to the Cooper assessment records, there were no large losses of seasonal units between

1980 and 1990. So it seems likely that census workers in April of 1990 did not know of (or bother to find) over 40 seasonal units. These units were probably located on camp roads when ice was still on the lake and seasonal roads were deeply rutted with mud. Seasonal units increased from 81 to 98 units in the 20 year period between 1980 and 2000. This is only a 21% increase and not the huge apparent increase if only the 1990 and 2000 census numbers are compared. Given the very large inaccuracies evident in the 1990 census of seasonal housing in Cooper, any analysis of growth trends in housing in Cooper must include the 1980 census even after the 2010 census is complete.

Affordable housing is often defined as not costing more than 30% of household income. The data reviewed demonstrate first that town level data is not available. However within the Calais Labor Market Area (LMA) housing market the cost of housing is not affordable for most people (75%) in the community. The home price that could be afforded at the housing market median household income of \$29,979 was \$87,601. Those with lower incomes, approximately 75% percent of households in Cooper, are losing access to the housing market and the price of real estate in Cooper is increasing.

Existing land use ordinances do not impose significant costs on the cost of building homes and the majority of people live in owner-occupied single-family housing. The desire for vacation homes on waterfront properties by non-residents has raised the value, and assessment, of many properties in Cooper. There is a range of new housing in town, including mobile or manufactured homes. The percentage of homes owned by those in the workforce is likely to decline further while the percentage of homes owned by retirees - both those from away and natives - will increase.

Transportation

The transportation linkages in Cooper consist primarily of State Route 191. Our town is reliant on its road network as the primary means of transportation movement. Overall, the public roadways in Cooper are in poor to fair condition. Route 191, the main travel way is in very poor condition. The shoulders are unpaved and very soft, the ditches are deep and the edge of road surface is crumbling in several locations. Route 191 serves as the primary arterial between the two most populated centers of the county, Machias and Calais, and between the international border and coastal Washington County. The volume of heavy truck traffic is enormous and it is traversing a road that was never designed or constructed to accommodate their volume or their weight. The result is unsafe conditions particularly at night and in severe weather.

The road surface has deteriorated (multiple longitudinal cracks, eroding shoulders and road surface) and is nearly impossible to maintain in winter weather because of extensive longitudinal tire ruts that create an undulating road profile from shoulder to shoulder. A very short stretch of Route 191 on Cooper Hill was reconstructed (with 4 foot shoulders) in the summer of 2010 and a significantly longer area was only resurfaced (no shoulders). Many of the portions that were resurfaced will return very quickly to their previous condition with the weight of trucks and winter weather.

Information from the state which classifies roads as town owned or private is antiquated. Research is necessary to clarify actual road status. Town Source material has not been accessible. Since town records have been, and will continue to be transferred to a new, accessible location, we will be able to adequately conduct our research, and will update our data.

Since MDOT has jurisdiction over most main roads and one bridge within Cooper, the town will continue to communicate and cooperate with the department. The town requires all new roads to be constructed to specific municipal standards.

Public Facilities and Services

Through proper maintenance and investment, Cooper's public facilities and services have remained in good condition overall. However Route 191 is in serious disrepair because it was never fully constructed for the truck and vehicle traffic that it receives. More discussion on this issue is provided in the Transportation chapter.

Cooper has many recreational opportunities because of the vast natural resources of the Town and the region, and a few municipal recreational facilities. Some of the Town's most important recreational resources rely on waterfront access, which we should seek to maintain and improve. Scenic view protection is particularly important to Cooper residents.

Although the town has not previously established a formal Capital Improvement Plan, reserve accounts have been used for many necessary items and a CIP is proposed in this Comprehensive Plan.

Fiscal Capacity

Cooper has been doing very well in managing its finances over the last five years and the mil rate has remained within a consistent range. In the past, the town has budgeted for capital improvements through the use of grant funds and local revenues. A new reserve account was approved at town meeting this year (2008) for potential expenses associated with renovation of the Grange, if needed, and a Capital Investment Plan is now proposed as part of the Comprehensive Plan. The town has kept funds in surplus in the past to cover capital improvements and will now formally create a capital investment reserve account with some of these funds.

Land Use

Cooper is feeling development pressure associated with conversion of residential second home subdivisions along lakefronts. Support exists for regulation on development activity but there is some concern that it not be excessive or burdensome. This plan is intended to protect the town's character and to direct residential and commercial activities to appropriate areas. It also seeks to ensure that residents can continue to support themselves with a mixture of activities necessitated by seasonal and diverse rural livelihoods.

Town Survey

In early 2009 Cooper residents completed a survey to give their views on important aspects of the town's future. The participation rate was high (29.6% response rate) for surveys of this type and included a great deal of written input.

Questions on housing in the survey were focused on the types of strategies towns can implement to make housing more affordable to residents. Respondents generally did not favor dimensional regulations that allowed greater density. Neither did they favor areas in growth areas for mobile home parks though opinions were not as strong against this concept as they were against regulatory

options. Respondents do favor allowing accessory apartments and participating in a regional affordable housing coalition. Opinions were mixed on creating a community affordable housing committee.

On questions about desired types of economic activity respondents strongly supported home based businesses. Also supported were professional business and some retail uses. All of the development associated with recreational facilities, recreational equipment sales and services, guiding and seasonal camping were strongly favored. Casino and gaming facilities were not favored, nor were adult entertainment facilities. Consistent with this sentiment, respondents favor low scale tourism developments rather than large operations like resorts. One of the most strongly disfavored activities was salvage and junk facilities. Particularly supported was a gas station and convenience store. The written comments speak to a desire for small scale operations in keeping with the quiet rural nature of the town as did the responses to different types of agriculture.

Several questions asked about local roads and transportation. Respondents are generally satisfied with summer road conditions though they are less satisfied with winter road conditions. Opinions on investments for road improvements were varied. Adding shoulders was strongly supported as were improvements for stormwater run-off from town roads into Cooper Lakes. Support for coordination among towns to seek ways to improve Route 191 was significant.

Respondents were asked how much they favored/disfavored investment in their preservation priorities and in community services and then to choose 3 of their highest priorities. In summary the two highest were restoration/renovation of the Cathance Grange and constructing a new town office/community building. The next highest priority for town investments was to discontinue winter maintenance of all unpaved town roads.

Respondents were generally satisfied with town and regional/community services or had no opinion about them. Respondents are also generally satisfied with other services while many are dissatisfied with the availability of high speed (broadband) internet access. The condition of the cemeteries was found satisfactory by most as was the recycling center/landfill/transfer station though there were some who are strongly dissatisfied with it. Most are satisfied with the property tax level though there were many who were dissatisfied or strongly dissatisfied.

Respondents to the survey expressed support for the town to prevent uncontrolled development through development of a zoning ordinance and a noise control ordinance. Specific provisions in a future zoning ordinance generated a range of opinions. Disallowing development in areas identified as having particular scenic significance was strongly supported. Including provisions that could attract business to Cooper was supported as was requiring that commercial development be in concentrated areas. Requiring residential development to be in concentrated areas was not supported nearly as much and many had no opinion on the idea. Many also had no opinion on adding lighting controls to shield off property glare.

Opinions on regionalization were generally positive particularly for regional ambulance services. Support for coordination among towns to seek ways to improve Route 191 was significant. Participation in a regional airport authority was polarized with many expressing no opinion perhaps because they did not understand what it means for the town. Re-consideration of the de-organization

of town government did not have a majority of support though some still think it deserves consideration. Future annexation of land from unorganized territory received very mixed opinions with many expressing no opinion at all. Again, this may result from a lack of understanding of what such annexation would look like or mean for the town.

Regional Coordination

Cooper has a long history of cooperation with adjoining towns and multiple towns in the region. This activity is strongest in the sharing of public facilities and municipal services as the cost savings are often most clearly realized in these areas. Cooper is very active on regional committees and authorities dealing with solid waste, emergency response, watershed management and economic development. These activities will continue with a strong emphasis on regional transportation policy, facilities sharing and infrastructure development (high speed broadband Internet in particular).

Map Disclaimer:

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