

## Maintain Rural Character

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Like that of many Maine towns, the Bremen Comprehensive Plan<sup>1</sup> has as its primary goal to “Preserve Bremen’s Rural, Sparsely Settled Character. . .” When the plan was approved in 2004, both residents who lived in Bremen all their lives and those who moved here from other areas thought it was important to maintain the town’s rural character. But what exactly is “Rural Character?” There is no “one-size, fits all” definition of Rural Character for towns in Maine. Some towns might define rural character as establishing a town preserve or forest; for others it means keeping a vibrant downtown village and preventing big-box development on its outskirts.

It is easier to define what rural character is not – it is not large subdivisions with cookie cutter houses arranged in cul-de-sacs or clustered around golf courses. It is not high-rise condominiums and apartment buildings towering above their neighbors, blocking scenic views. It is not large-scale manufacturing or retail facilities, surrounded by acres of asphalt. Nor is it a harbor full of only fancy yachts.

What gives Bremen “Rural Character” is a combination of its landscape and its inhabitants. Bremen has large unbroken blocks of forest; open fields and scenic views; ponds and tidal waters; and diverse wildlife populations – all those things that make us want to live here. But more than that, it is a fishing community, a place where lobster traps are piled high beside fishermen’s homes, and lobster boats can be stored beside garages. Bremen has extensive and productive tidal mudflats that provide livelihoods for clambers. There are hundreds of acres of cleared fields that only need new farmers to bring them back to life.

Bremen is also home to talented artists and crafts people, perhaps inspired by the beautiful landscape that surrounds them. There are shops and stands along Route 32 and other Bremen roads where residents sell gifts, crafts, pottery, antiques, baked goods, metal art, etc. Such cottage industry is what helps give Bremen some of its rural character.

The rural character of Bremen is also apparent through its housing patterns, with most homes either clustered in small villages, or scattered along the roads and shores, leaving large blocks of interior open space intact.

In 2006 a new phrase entered the Maine vocabulary, “Quality of Place,” from the Brookings Institution Report *Charting Maine’s Future*.<sup>2</sup> All the elements that comprise Bremen’s Rural Character go into determining its own **Quality of Place**.

## Forests

The importance of Bremen's forested lands in defining its rural character cannot be overstated. Whether seen by land, sea or air, Bremen's forests are its most predominant feature, broken here and there by houses, fields, ponds and roads. Aerial views of Bremen show land almost completely covered by forest. Most roads through town, even parts of Route 32, are lined by trees. Viewed from the water, Bremen shores are still primarily covered by trees, thanks in part to the Shoreland Zoning Ordinance.

But forests provide much more than scenery. They protect the quality and quantity of our water resources. (See section on Protecting Water Resources).

Forests provide essential habitat for birds and wildlife – food, water, and the protection they need to live and reproduce. Healthy wildlife habitats are indicators of a healthy environment, for both people and animals.<sup>3</sup> Forests also provide recreational opportunities such as hunting, hiking and snowshoeing. Currently, most forest land in Bremen is open to individuals who want to hunt, look for mushrooms, sight a moose or special songbird, or simply take a walk in the woods.

A healthy forest also has an economic factor. Sustainable forest management can provide wood for stoves and fireplaces, logs for paper and building, maple syrup, Christmas trees and wreaths, thereby producing a small income for landowners.

The loss of much of Bremen's forest land to development would have harmful effects on not just the town's "rural character" but almost all aspects of life in Bremen as we know it.

## Fields, Farms and Scenic Vistas

Farms, fields and scenic vistas go hand in hand since the fields used for crops and forage also provide the scenic vistas that give rural areas their distinctive character. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, open fields were common in Bremen, providing clear views to the Medomak River and beyond to Waldoboro and Friendship.

Farms were an integral part of life in Bremen. Just about every family did some farming. Fields were mowed for hay to feed the family cow and horses, gardens and orchards provided fruits and vegetables, and forests provided firewood and logs for buildings. Most men who didn't make their living from the sea were farmers, and some were both. The rocky soils in Bremen don't lend themselves easily to growing commercial crops,<sup>4</sup> but some commercial farming was carried on in Bremen up through the late 20th century. Potatoes, corn, and hay crops were common. Wild blueberries were raked and sold. Apples were an important crop, and remnants of old heritage apple trees can still be found, often producing edible fruits. Considerable dairying was carried on in Bremen, with milk shipped via train as far away as Boston. Some dairy farming continued up to the 1970s. Raising sheep was common in early days and numerous farms at mid-century raised poultry to sell their eggs and for meat.

Today there is little commercial farming in Bremen, nor any farmstands selling produce. Many residents have gardens for their own use, and several have pastures for riding horses. There are goats, chickens, some sheep, a couple cows, a few llamas, and a donkey or two, none of which require the large fields of hay once common throughout town. Fields which provided grazing for farm animals, and at the same time offered glimpses of Broad Cove and the Medomak River, are slowly but surely being overtaken by brush and trees.

Why should we care about preserving farmland? As spelled out by the Maine Farmland Trust<sup>5</sup> in their Spring 2008 newsletter, reasons for preserving farmland include open space, rural character, scenic views, water recharge, water quality, wildlife habitat, hunting, snowmobiling, local jobs, local food, smart growth, culture, heritage, and much more.

Without working farms in Bremen, many fields will give way to subdivisions with the resultant loss of wildlife habitat, scenic views, resource protection, recreational opportunities, and rural character.

### Working Waterfront and Fishing Community

The fishing community plays a key role in defining Bremen's rural character. As pointed out in a recent article in *Down East*,<sup>6</sup> "the reason people come to Maine and want to stay in Maine is because of its traditional livelihoods that are still found here. Without that, this becomes a place like any other coastal state in the United States."

This same thought was expressed in Bremen's Comprehensive Plan<sup>7</sup>:

"It is the very authenticity of a working fishing community which makes Bremen such an attractive community for year round retired living."



Bremen still has this sense of place. Lobster boats and buoys are a common sight on the Medomak River, Muscongus Bay, and Greenland Cove. At low tide, the tidal flats are worked by the clambers. According to the 2004 Comprehensive Plan, there were about 50 lobster licenses of all classes in Bremen.<sup>8</sup> In 2006, there were 32 resident and 4 non-resident commercial shellfish harvesters in Bremen, plus another 5 shellfish licenses went to students, and 31 for recreational use.<sup>9</sup> There is some shrimping in winter and

eeling in the spring.

Although the fishing industry in Bremen seems stable, new state and federal rules, high fuel costs, diseases that affect shellfish and reduce catches, pollution and red tides that close clam flats all take their toll. Another problem is the potential loss of access, not just in Bremen but

throughout the Maine Coast.. In 2007, the Island Institute completed a comprehensive inventory of the state’s Working Waterfront and public access infrastructure. It reported that:

“within the 142 coastal towns and 5,300 miles that make up the coast of Maine, 1,555 points were identified as providing saltwater access . . . . Of the 1,555 identified saltwater access points, 88 points support commercial fishing activities; of these, 66 percent are privately owned and vulnerable to conversion to other, incompatible uses . . . . Only 81 access points have all three criteria for “prime” working waterfront: adequate parking, all-tide access and on-site fuel availability. Only 62 of these 81 ‘prime’ working waterfront points currently support commercial fishing.”<sup>10</sup>

The situation in Bremen reflects those findings. The town maintains one dock in Medomak that is available to commercial and recreational boaters. The dock has semi-adequate parking and all-tide access, but does not have on-site fuel availability. Nor does it have launching capability for any boat larger than a kayak or canoe. Most lobstermen use one of five or six private docks and landings, all of which are vulnerable to conversion for private use only. Two other prime working waterfront locations are owned by non-profit organizations and not available for commercial fishing purposes.

Conversion of current fishing docks to private marinas or recreational use only could leave fishermen with only the town dock available for their use, with no fueling capability, inadequate parking and no boat launching capability.

Clammers in Bremen can use the town dock or the town boat ramp at the end of Storer road which has very limited parking. They can also use a town right-of-way at the head of Greenland Cove. Most access to clam flats is over private land, access that can be lost at any time.

In 2007 the town approved a new Harbor Ordinance that the Harbor Committee felt “reflects the growing needs and demands of a changing waterfront while helping Bremen’s desire to maintain its commercial fishing industry.”<sup>11</sup> The ordinance recognizes the importance of the fishing industry by giving first priority for additional moorings in the Hockomock Channel/Keene Narrows area to “municipal resident commercial fishing watercraft” (except for initial single requests from shorefront residents and town resident grand-fathered moorings).

## **Maintaining Rural Character**

The greatest threat to maintaining the rural character of a town like Bremen comes not from large-scale industry or commercial development, but from slowly creeping suburban sprawl. Almost without notice, residential development divides large tracts of forest land into smaller parcels. Houses sprout in fields where cows used to graze. Modest cottages along the shore give way to much larger houses and septic systems, with greater run-off potential. Recreational boats gradually take the place of working boats. Acre by acre, mooring by mooring, a town’s distinctive rural character, its **“Quality of Place,”** is lost.

## Objectives:

- Preserve the predominately forested landscape.
- Retain open fields for scenic views, wildlife habitat, and agriculture.
- Maintain waterfront access for commercial fisherman and clambers.
- Keep Bremen an inviting place for fishermen, clambers, farmers, and craftspeople.

1. Comprehensive Plan, Town of Bremen, November 2004.
2. The Brookings Institution, *Charting Maine's Future*, 2006.
3. GrowSmart Maine, *Sprawl and Wildlife Habitat*, p. 1, [www.GrowSmartMaine.org](http://www.GrowSmartMaine.org) , August 2007.
4. Iris and Alonzo Gibbs, *Bremen Bygones* (Town of Bremen, 1976), "Making a Living", pp. 28-30.
5. Maine Farmland Trust, [www.Mainefarmland.org](http://www.Mainefarmland.org), (Belfast, ME), Newsletter Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 8
6. Jeff Clark, "The Vanishing Point," *Down East*, May 2007, pp. 45-49, 77-79.
7. Comprehensive Plan, op.cit., p. 60.
8. Ibid., p. 56.
9. Town of Bremen, 2006 Annual Report, p. 75, "2006 Shellfish Conservation Committee Report." (Note: No 2007 report available).
10. Shey Conover, "Coastal access is scarce, study finds," *Working Waterfront/Inter-Island News*, Island Institute (Rockland, ME), April 2007, p. 3.
11. Town of Bremen, 2007 Annual Report, p. 70, "Harbor Committee 2007 Annual Report."