

Year-in-Review Update

Presented at the September 2, 2025 Bar Harbor Town Council Special Meeting.

Over the past year, the Town has carried a heavy workload while continuing to move forward on the previous Council's stated priorities:

- Sustainable tourism
- Housing
- Fiscal sustainability
- Public engagement.

Sustaining Daily Services While Advancing Priorities

Much of the staff's work is largely invisible but essential. When you turn on the tap water and clear clean drinking water flows, you do not see the flushing programs, the pump calibrations, or the chemical adjustments that make it safe. Or, when you flush the toilet and everything disappears, you do not see the miles of sewer lines cleaned, the odor systems tuned, or the plant operators balancing flows to protect the bay.

When you drive around town and do not hit a pothole, you didn't see the road crews out there patching potholes or making culvert repairs to ensure roads don't wash away. When you walk downtown in the morning and the sidewalks are clean, you didn't see the staff who power washed the sidewalks at 5am, or emptied the public trash bins before the first stores opened. When the parks are mowed, the trees trimmed, and the playgrounds are safe, you didn't see the inspections, repairs, and scheduling that made it all possible.

When the harbor is orderly and the pier safe, you don't see the underwater inspections, mooring reorganization, or the gangway maintenance all done between tides. When parking is available and meters are working, you do not see the maintenance, the collections, the enforcement, or the analysis that guides future policy.

When you call 911 and help arrives, you do not see the dispatchers calmly directing multiple emergencies, or the investment in training and technology that makes the system seamless. When police presence keeps the peace, you don't see the overnight patrols, the follow up on cases, or the training that keeps officers ready. You also do not see the coverage that ensures every call is answered, the investigations that continue long after an incident, or the community engagement that prevents small concerns from becoming larger problems. The visible calm on our streets is made possible by a full team working behind the scenes, every hour of the day.

When a fire is contained quickly or an ambulance arrives in minutes, you do not see the daily checks on hoses, ladders, and ambulances, or the countless hours of drills and coordination that make that possible.

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When town finances are stable, you do not see the reconciliations, the audits, the bond management, or the grant applications that protect the Town's credit and keep projects moving. When meetings run smoothly and records are available, you do not see the packet preparation, the minutes recorded, or the compliance work that ensures decisions are traceable.

This is the quiet reality of local government. Staff balance the daily services that are often not noticed while ensuring they are carrying forward the Town Council's priorities. While the Town Council provides the vision and direction. Staff carry that vision into daily action. Success is when the community does not have to think about what it takes, because the work has already been done. Quietly, professionally, and sufficiently.

Council Goal: Sustainable Tourism

While the work in sustainable tourism has been slow to start, as there was and is a need to collect data, determine facts and begin to formulate a process. Staff have been busy behind the scenes collecting such data that often times was available but not previously identified.

In a community like Bar Harbor developing a sustainable tourism management plan, is much like building a jumbo jet in midair. The opportunities, challenges, issues and strengths of a vibrant tourism economy do not slow down, stop, or wait for the Town to put a plan together. Let alone one that balances the divergent interests and needs of the community at large. Yet, we have successfully implemented a sustainable tourism management task force of local citizens. We have successfully contracted an international consultant firm, based out of Alexandria, VA to support this work and we are eager to begin moving through the public conversations and listening sessions to find a plan that works for the entire community.

Collateral work, related to the issue of tourism was the implementation of a moratorium of transient accommodations. Staff are busy collecting and analyzing numerous data points and are working in conjunction with the Planning Board on interpreting this information, a necessary process to bring back possible policy solutions for future Council consideration, or a town meeting vote where appropriate. Staff are sensitive to this issue and we understand there are strong opinions on multiple sides of this conversation, yet we remain confident that these interests are not mutually exclusive and that real solutions are possible and obtainable.

The Safe Streets for All work is also tangentially related to the issue of sustainable tourism, as it deals with developing and implementing real solutions for managing our transportation infrastructure to better accommodate and facilitate vehicles, bicyclists, and pedestrians. While this work is more infrastructure focused, it does have policy overlap that will help shape the safe, efficient exchange of inter-modal transportation across the community and will help manage and

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direct the extreme volume of people who come to visit Acadia National Park and Bar Harbor each year.

Council Goal: Housing and Land Use

Through the revised Housing Policy Framework and with prior Council direction and community feedback, this framework has begun to take shape in the form of a number of ordinance updates. This year, changes were made to allow more types of work force and employee housing across additional districts. Further housing-related amendments are already scheduled for November 2025 and possibly June 2026.

The town was also able to partner with Acadia National Park to ensure adequate funding and infrastructure upgrades were aligned to support their Cromwell Harbor Workforce Housing Project. Each additional new housing unit built on the island, whether seasonal or year-round, contributes to the reduction of the burden on the islands housing inventory.

Further, staff have worked diligently on the Town Hill Housing Project, which is currently a parcel of land authorized by Congress to be transferred from the National Parks Service to the Town of Bar Harbor for the purpose of developing affordable workforce housing for the island towns.

Staff have also been working on necessary revisions to Chapter 174 to help both strengthen access for year-round residents to have short-term rentals at their primary residency; while also ensuring that the program loop holes are closed and that this policy is not exploited.

Council Goal: Fiscal Sustainability

Staff worked to protect the Town's strong financial footing during a year of continued pressure on property taxpayers. The Finance Department successfully closed a \$56 million school bond sale, while maintaining or improving our bond ratings. All while delivering a clean FY24 audit.

At the same time, Finance advanced their research on user-fees and rate analyses to provide future options to provide to Council during upcoming budget discussions in order to further shift burdens away from the property tax base.

A key step taken during last year budget discussions was the decision direct one million dollars of parking revenues to property tax relief. This approach avoided creating new ongoing programs and financial obligations. Obligations that often grow over time, and instead provided immediate and direct benefits to our taxpayers.

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Work has also continued on the Transfer Facility reorganization and funding model. Staff are reviewing operations and exploring potential shifts from the current property tax support to a user fee-based system. This analysis is complex, given the variety of waste streams, rate structures, and equity considerations, but progress is ongoing with the aim of identifying a fair and sustainable funding approach while managing recycling and waste services for the community.

At the state level, the Town continues to highlight the pressures created when municipalities are tasked with meeting growing service demands through property taxes alone. In communities like Bar Harbor, where seasonal tourism significantly drives the demand for services, the primary cost drivers are not necessarily year-round residents. State tax policy that recognizes this imbalance is essential for achieving a fair and equitable distribution of costs. Local option revenue tools and relief from unfunded mandates would better align responsibility for costs with those who create the demand for services.

These efforts reflect a balanced approach: safeguarding the Town's financial position while pressing for policy changes that acknowledge the realities of service delivery in high-tourism communities.

Council Goal: Public Engagement & Communications

The aim of our public engagement efforts has been to improve the quality and consistency of communications by creating clear protocols for how staff communicate outwardly and with one another. The concept is straightforward: when messages are aligned, accurate, and timely, the community is better informed, disruptions are easier to manage, and residents can participate earlier in decision-making.

To that end, we have strengthened our use of press statements, Facebook updates, website notices, and internal communication channels so that departments are speaking with one voice. A key initiative now underway is a comprehensive review of the Town website led by a staff team. This review is focused on improving access, making navigation more intuitive, and ensuring content is clear, accurate, and up to date. The website is often the place residents and visitors go for information, and this project will make it a more effective hub for public communication.

Public engagement also means helping residents understand ongoing projects, road closures, facility work, and other disruptions that affect daily life. In addition, it is about ensuring meaningful public input into policy. The Safe Streets for All and Vision Zero process included targeted listening sessions at the start of the project, and the Town's request for proposals for consultant services to support the Sustainable Tourism Task Force required guaranteed stakeholder engagement and listening sessions. Setting these expectations at the beginning creates a consistent model for early involvement, clear messaging, and transparency throughout each process.

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Next Steps

The story of the past year is one of progress and pressure. Departments completed critical projects while carrying forward many more in various stages of design, permitting, or planning. Staff capacity is stretched but focused. We are asking the Town Council to continue expressing desired outcomes and priorities at the upcoming goal setting workshop. This will allow staff to help translate these goals and objectives into a framework or actionable items.

This upcoming workshop also provides a moment to step back and evaluate the direction of the Town as a whole. Council will have the opportunity to consider whether to refine the course we are on, pivot toward a new direction, or continue firmly on our current path.

By moving this process up slightly, this also allows staff to keep this process aligned with the budget development cycle, ensuring that Council's direction is not only aspirational but also actionable within available resources.

Town Manager James L. Smith