

Awards And Distinctions For The Commons

2005

National Trust for Historic Preservation - Main Street Program
One of 5 national projects featured at National Convention in New Orleans

2006

National Trust for Historic Preservation - Main Street Program
Feature article in national newsletter and featured presentation at
National Convention in Seattle

2008

Yankee Magazine - Editor's Choice
Named a "Destination Gallery"

2011

Maine Department of Tourism - Director's Award
For Tourism Excellence and "Being a spark that ignited the economic revival in Eastport"

2012

GrowSmart Maine - Video for Annual Conference
Four Success Stories in Maine - Story #4 - Eastport
<http://vimeo.com/channels/growsmartmaine/51756710>

2016

Maine Women's Fund
Visionary Partner Award

Take a Virtual Tour of Our Rental Condos and Destination Gallery

www.thecommonseastport.com

The Commons:

A common vision drives community-initiated development success

By ANDREA L. DONO

Although *Down East Magazine* declared that Eastport, Maine, is just "waiting to be discovered," nine area ladies have already found it. After years of passing by vacant and deteriorating buildings in their beloved downtown, these Mainers, ranging in age from their 50s to 90s, decided the time had come to act on their long-term commitment to the community. With a common vision for the Main Street district and a shared love of this small town, they pooled their resources and individual expertise to turn a historic building into a mixed-use rehabilitation project that sustains the recent momentum of reinvestment.

"We joke that this project took 39 weeks and 37 large dumpsters," says Linda Godfrey, one of the nine partners in the limited liability corporation formed to initiate the development of The Commons project. Nestled in the historic district about 20 feet from the waterfront, this prime real estate offered great potential.

Eastport's economic revival has been happening slowly over the past two decades, and The Commons is one of a number of catalyst projects invigorating the downtown. Eastport is unique in that it is a collection of several islands, many accessible only by ferry



"The Women of The Commons": Back row from left: Anna Baskerville, Meg McGarvey, Nancy Asante, Linda Godfrey, Vera Francis. Front row from left: Sue Crawford, Alice Otis, Ruth Brown, Alice Gough. Photo © Gary Guisinger

or boat. The downtown is on Moose Island, which is connected by a causeway to the mainland. Lora Whelan, director of the local Main Street program, Eastport for Pride, says that Eastport was one of the last affordable coastal places: "For a while, you could find waterfront property for \$20,000, but not any more."

Whelan says the community has seen peaks and valleys in interest among people "from away" — non-native Mainers who would buy buildings cheaply, make minimal improvements, and then sell or rent them for a lot of money. She says Eastport for Pride tries to limit that trend by educating prospective property owners about realistic expectations for rent, property taxes, the local building

climate, and the services the city provides. "Being careful about what happens downtown helps control rapid growth, which is so important to keeping the small town feel. We want Eastport to remain authentic."

Eastport for Pride has been working to facilitate the climate for this rise in reinvestment. In addition to using grant money to offer a façade improvement program, which has funded 10 façade projects that have had a huge impact on the district, the program also hosts a lecture series.

One of the lectures featured a couple from Bangor, Maine, who used historic tax credits and innovative partnerships to reduce risk in their rehabilitation projects. Godfrey said her partners gleaned a lot of useful information from listening to people who had already done it. The speakers also offered the women a lot of encouragement for The Commons and thought that Eastport was a community ripe for investment not only because of its unique charm but because it is still an active fishing village.

JUST THE RIGHT TIME

While the Main Street program worked with local code enforcement officials and the review board to compel the owners of a row of historic buildings that weren't being maintained to improve their properties, other projects like The Commons have been an organic process. It was just the right time, says Whelan.

Godfrey concurs: "It was a combination of place, purpose, and promise of what might be if we work together." One of the catalysts, she says, was the filming of a television movie, *Murder in Small Town X*, in 2001. The whole town was used as a stage set, and the production company added lighting, displays, and signs to vacant buildings, which showed Eastport what the community could look like with an infusion of investment. Secondly, the production demonstrated what the town would be like with the infusion of 100 additional people who had money to spend and worked in creative jobs.

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Built as the Mincton Building in 1887, following a fire that destroyed Eastport's entire downtown, The Commons was restored in 2004 and houses an artisan gallery, offices, and two weekly rental suites. Photo © The Commons

"We saw that when you have ideas, courage, and the right connections, you can get people to invest in your idea and succeed. We took those lessons to heart and applied them in our own way," says Godfrey.

She also says she had an epiphany while listening to an interview with the author of a community revitalization publication on Maine Public Radio. A person in Michigan called in to ask what could be done with her beautiful waterfront community, which was boarded up and lacked retail. When the author asked who owned those vacant buildings, the caller replied that they were people who lived in other cities. The caller was told her city didn't have a retail problem, it had an ownership problem.

"We have talked all these years about having a retail problem, but we realized that we, too, have an ownership problem," says Godfrey. "People who have been living here, and new residents moving here, decided that for Eastport to be a vital community we need to take ownership of it. It has been a mighty change."

GEOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

Eastport's isolated geography offers as many challenges as it does opportunities. Close to the Canadian border, it is culturally connected with our northern neighbor as well as with local American Indian tribes. Its environmental and scenic assets make it a peaceful haven for eco-tourists and artists, which makes the district well poised for tourism. Whelan points out that much of the downtown's historic fabric is intact and within the historic district. The Main Street program works in partnership with the local historic preservation review board to help protect the downtown's physical integrity.

However, the salty air and tides that periodically flood basements make it challenging to care for these structures, especially given the years of

economic depression and disinvestment. With a population of only 1,600, once the canneries and fishing industries dried up and with the closest metropolitan area about three hours away, local business owners needed daring and creativity to succeed. Keeping in mind the long winters and the fact that many summer tourists still flock to Mount Desert Island and Bar Harbor, the ladies of The Commons sought compatible uses for their building that could support each other during the slow season and serve as a destination during tourist season.

Determined to lead by example, the partners strove to get their project off the ground and completed as quickly as possible. They assembled their partnership to fund the purchase of the \$100,000 Mincton Building and pay for the rehabilitation work. After leveraging financial contributions from most of the partners with a bank loan, they got to work right away. Godfrey says that all partners are valued equally and that what people didn't contribute in funding, they provide in unique skills and expertise.

Taking a new approach to development in the community, the partners hired two teams of contractors – a team of experts well seasoned in rehabilitation work and a younger team that served as apprentices, giving the project a craftsman incubator element. In addition, they covered the structure with plastic during the winter, a season during which most construction work stops, so that work could continue.

Godfrey says that at least one of the partners was on site every day, learning what they needed to know so they were readily available to answer contractors' questions and prevent delays. "People downtown would ask us how we managed to get our contractors to show up everyday," she says. "It was our respect for them and our encouragement to make them feel what they were doing was special. The



A deck with grill overlooks Passamaquoddy Bay and Campobello Island, famous for the historic summer home of FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt. Eastport is the first city in the U.S. to see the sunrise and moonrise and the deck is the perfect place to enjoy both. Photo © The Commons

whole community was watching to see this exciting and inspiring project come to fruition." She also adds that the home-baked goods that Meg McGarvey, another Commons partner, delivered almost every day didn't hurt, either.

The rehabilitation, although an extensive project, was completed in less than a year. The partners applied for and received a \$5,000 façade grant from Eastport for Pride. The Main Street program helped their architect meet design guidelines so the project would qualify.

A VISION-DRIVEN INITIATIVE

The Commons partners were guided by their vision for what they wanted to see happen in their town and a quote from President Teddy Roosevelt: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

"Some of us dreamed that there would be a place where the wonderful artisans from around our area in both the U.S. and Canada could come together to show their work," says Godfrey.

Understanding the challenges of relying on a single use for the building, The Commons partners decided to fill the space with multiple uses, including two rental suites with waterfront views, perfect for artists and people on sabbatical and longer stays; a gallery; offices; and conference meeting space.

"Our project design is not intended to draw large numbers of people," says Godfrey, "but instead people who seek a wonderful, natural environment and who want close interaction with people and places to have a more intimate experience."

The Commons partners have a few strategies up their sleeves to prevent a tough

market from impeding their success. The 60 artists whose works they display and sell in the gallery help promote The Commons to their network of customers and peers. The space is also used as part of the Elder Hostel program, which attracts organized groups of senior citizens to the area on learning and experience-based travel.

The partners also tap the boundless market created by the Internet and even take artwork "on the road" to bring The Commons to the people. They've also taken their success story on the road, as various partners have presented their experience with the community initiated development (CID) process to show others that there are many ways to achieve success.

After reading an article in *The Utne Reader* on Jonathan Rowe's concept of "the commons" – the hidden economy and part of life found outside the marketplace and the state – the ladies named their first project to reflect "placemaking" principles, the need for community spaces, and the desire to welcome the entire community to their new business. The thinkers behind the "commons movement" ask if common assets are being responsibly managed on behalf of the general public and seek ways to bolster local economies with local assets.

"In undiscovered communities like Eastport, there is a fine line between wanting to share what you love and being tentative about sharing because you know that when others experience it, that it may, in some ways, change what you have," says Godfrey. "We just need to find ways to balance the design of our community and look to the future in a creative, yet cautious, way so that it remains a place that residents want to live in year-round and also a place that visitors cherish and enjoy."

ANOTHER VISION, ANOTHER PROJECT

The Commons was hardly finished when another property a few of the partners had been

eyeing for years came up for sale. Three of the original team members bought the building and formed an S corporation for the 15 Sea Street Pier project, with two levels of investors. In order to build community ownership of the project, Sea Street partners will seek up to 50 smaller investors from the community. Godfrey says that so many people contacted them about participating in The Commons development that they decided on this small investment idea to

make the Sea Street project more accessible to other people. Although these investors will be nonvoting partners, Godfrey hopes they will provide creative ideas and valuable input.

This second venture seeks to become a focal point for visitors and provide more lodging space. It will be mixed-use, as well, and will celebrate local marine culture with historical interpretation, arts, and goods. This time the partners will investigate outside funding and, at their request, Eastport for Pride will host two lectures on historic tax credits and creating a TIF district. They also hope to collaborate with the city and the owner on the renovation of a pier next to the building to create parking.

Another new twist on the project is the inclusion of



The enterprising women of The Commons are preparing for their second project, the renovation of a 30,000-square-foot former sardine can manufacturing company. This multi-use business will feature art and marine-related shops on the first floor, a boutique hotel on the second, and four long-lease penthouse apartments on the third floor – with spectacular views of the islands, bay, and wildlife. The owners plan for the project, known as 15 Sea Street, to be a green building and serve as a model project for combining a historic property with the latest energy technology. Photo © Pat Pearson

green or energy-efficient technology. The ladies are researching wind, solar, and underwater tidal energy sources. By reaching out to LEED-certified professionals as well as local universities, they hope to move forward with true innovations and a completed project by the summer of 2008.

At the heart of the Sea Street project, like The Commons, is the partners' desire to get people to see the beauty of the area and appreciate what a unique, authentic community Eastport is. "These buildings may not attract huge numbers of people alone, but they still are lucrative," says Godfrey. "People have good experiences here and are treated as welcome guests... rather than one of many in a sea of tourists."

Godfrey says they plan to

use many of the same craftsmen and the same architecture firm that worked on The Commons because they value using local people and suppliers. The project is in its third phase of architectural drawings, and they expect to have the business plan and investors in place for a late autumn launch of the renovation work.

"We are true believers of culture as economy, history as economy...architecture, education, and tourism as economy," says Godfrey. "And all of those things are reflected in what The Commons and Sea Street are trying to do to build Eastport's economy and celebrate and protect those things that make our community so wonderful."



Sea Street Pier
Eastport, Maine

Designed by:
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