

Town of Freedom

2011 Comprehensive Plan

Summary of the Plan

Freedom's proposed comprehensive plan is 103 pages long, not including maps and appendix. Its 14 chapters contain a wealth of information about the town and over 150 specific recommendations on how to improve the town in areas ranging from promoting agriculture to fiscal management. This summary has been prepared to give residents an abbreviated idea of what has gone into the plan.

Chapter 1: Development of the Plan

This chapter describes the process the town used to prepare the plan. The process included an 8-person core committee, an opinion survey, and several public presentations and meetings. The plan was written so as to comply with the State rules for comprehensive planning (and the State Planning Office has recently ruled that it does comply.)

A critical part of the process of planning for Freedom is articulating a vision of what the town wants for its future. This "Vision Statement" is reproduced in full, below:

- Freedom is a small but diverse community consisting of village and rural landscapes, young and old residents, artists and entrepreneurs, farmers and professionals, visitors and lifelong residents;
- Freedom at the crossroads for several adjacent towns that lack clear town centers (Knox and Montville) has a vital village with the old mill and most of its other existing buildings retrofitted with a diversity of small businesses, local services, housing and events for people of all ages in the community and in two adjacent towns;
- Freedom has a wonderful rural landscape, scenic vistas, and enough undeveloped land to preserve the quality of Sandy Pond with a variety of local farms, public access to open space, outdoor recreation and protected critical resource areas;
- Freedom maintains a relatively low tax rate while providing quality public services. Active volunteering keeps the community vibrant and municipal costs down.
- Freedom provides economic opportunities and housing choices by managing and encouraging new development in a Village Growth Area near the existing village and encouraging re-development in the existing village in such a manner that neighborhood values, environmental resources, and the cost of public services are not adversely impacted.
- Freedom provides recreational opportunities to people of all ages and abilities and serves as a sportsmen's (hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, hiking, etc.) destination as well as a center of activity for local residents including good public access for boating and swimming at Sandy Pond.

- Freedom collaborates locally and regionally to enhance land conservation, develop recreational trails, minimize service costs, and improve mutual aid.
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Chapter 2: Population and Demographics

This chapter presents a statistical look at the population of Freedom. The plan uses this information to predict what the town will be like in 10 or 20 years, and what we need to do to prepare for it. The highlights:

- Freedom gained 74 people in the past 10 years, a growth rate of over 11 percent. Our 2010 population stood at 719. In 1970, the population was just 373, about half.
 - Of the population gain since 2000, only 15 were the difference between local births and deaths. Fifty-nine were newcomers to town.
 - America experienced a baby boom in mid-century, and that group of people is now aging and moving towards retirement. The impact even reaches Freedom. In 1970, over 32 percent of Freedom was under the age of 18, and only 13 percent over 65. In 2010, only 23 percent of residents were under 18; only 14.3 percent were over 65, but another 19 percent are within 10 years of that age.
 - Population is grouped into households. Households used to be mostly families, but more and more they are single people or a couple, or just a smaller family. Fewer people per household – as in Freedom where we went from an average of 3.1 people in 1970 to under 2.5 in 2010 – means things like demand for more and smaller houses.
 - The poor economy and increasing gas prices mean that Freedom’s population is not likely to grow very quickly in the short term. However, if household sizes keep shrinking and the population ages, we may need more and different housing even if we have no growth at all.
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Chapter 3: Economy

The local economy is profiled both by statistical information about labor force and incomes, and practical information about Freedom’s economic conditions.

The most conventional measure of economic health is income. In 2000, Freedom residents had a median household income of \$33,125 and a per capita income of \$15,492. These were increases of 60 percent and 13 percent, respectively, over the figures for 1990. However, since the rate of inflation during that time was 32 percent, the improvements were not all that staggering. Preliminary information for 2010 indicates household incomes almost unchanged, despite an inflation rate of 28 percent.

Income is generally a function of people working. In Freedom, just about 65 percent of all people old enough to work are in the labor force. There are substantially more people working than there are households, which means over 1/3 of households have two or more workers. However, the recent recession cut dramatically into the workforce. As of 2009, Freedom’s unemployment rate stood at 10.8 percent, higher than the average for either the Belfast employment zone or Maine, and more than double the rate back in 2005.

As a highly rural town, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of local workers commute to out of town job locations. Four of every five workers do so, with the most popular destinations being Belfast, Augusta, and Waterville. Those that remain in Freedom work primarily in the local farms or woods, or run small businesses. There are no significant employers in town, nor is there the sewer, water, road, or other infrastructure capable of supporting them.

Top recommendations of the economy section are to appoint a local economic development committee to research economic possibilities in tourism, recreation, agriculture and natural resource based industries, and to participate in regional economic development efforts.

Chapter 4: Housing

Housing is a necessity of life. Although the housing sector is almost entirely private enterprise, State law suggests that local governments have a role in ensuring that housing is safe, sanitary, and affordable. This chapter examines the types and price of housing in Freedom.

Freedom had 376 housing units in 2010, an increase of 174 houses since 1980. The biggest percentage increase during that time was in mobile homes – from 17 to 51. However, the town also gained 118 stick-built, single family homes. Over the past 10 years, Freedom has averaged 2 _ conventional houses and 1 _ new mobile homes per year.

About 28 percent of the houses in Freedom were built before World War II. These houses are more likely to be structurally stable than newer houses, but are more likely to be lacking in system updates, such as electricity, plumbing, and energy efficiency. As of 2000, 35 year-round houses in Freedom lacked complete plumbing facilities – about one out of 10.

Housing prices, which over the long term always appreciate, have been erratic over the past few years. The average home in 1980 cost only \$26,500, but by 2000, it cost \$65,000. The average (based on actual sales) shot up to \$128,000 in 2005, but by 2006 had already dropped back to \$86,000. In more recent years, there have been too few home sales to generate an average.

In general, it does not make much difference how much a home costs, as long as you can afford it. Maine State Housing Authority defines “affordability” as the ability to pay housing costs without exceeding a certain percentage of your income. In 2006 (the most recent year data is available), the median income could afford a \$119,000 home – well above the \$86,000 average sale price. But the 2010 census found that about 30 percent of homeowners still pay more than 1/3 of their income for housing. That implies that not on average but some specific households are finding housing costs a burden. These are most likely to be senior citizens or new families.

Top recommendations of the housing section include changing of local regulations to make housing less expensive to build, permitting accessory apartments in the growth (village) area, and looking for opportunities to develop senior housing in the regional market.

Chapter 5: Transportation

Transportation is the means by which we get from home to work, school, and the necessities of life, as well as access to recreation. Good roads help us make these trips in comfort and with a minimum of wear and tear on our vehicles. And as gas prices increase, more and more people are looking for alternatives to the automobile.

Public roads amount to about 30 miles in Freedom. Of this, the Belfast Road (Route 137) of about 4.8 miles is the only one that the Town has no maintenance responsibility. Three roads, about seven miles, are partly maintained by the State.

Local roads are maintained by town appropriations (\$108,500 in 2009) and a DOT grant (\$26,900 in 2009). These funds are generally adequate for routine maintenance, but significant additional money would be needed when major repairs come due.

Transportation options are limited in Freedom. There are no pedestrian or bicycle facilities or intercity bus or rail service. There is an extensive snowmobile trail network.

Top recommendations of the transportation section are to develop a 10-year plan for maintenance and improvement of local roads, remedy unsafe parking situations in the village, and change local ordinances to improve new development as it relates to the road system.

Chapter 6: Agriculture and Forestry

In a traditional town such as Freedom, land-based economic activities such as farming and forestry are a critical component part of the community. Like other elements of society, though, the practice of farming is changing. Traditional farming in Freedom included dairy, poultry, livestock and fruits and vegetables. Many of these have become less viable due to competition. The trend is shifting towards small farms with high-value products. The number of acres in farms in Waldo County has dropped by five percent over ten years, but the number of farms has grown by 1/3 and the average income per farm has grown by 52 percent.

Of the 16 active farms inventoried for the plan, only three are in the traditional dairy business. Half of them own less than 100 acres; many raise high-value specialty crops ranging from Christmas Trees to garlic seed stock. Most are in the northeastern quarter of town, although they are widely distributed. Fourteen are enrolled in the farmland tax program, which provides reduced tax assessments.

About 80 percent of the land area of Freedom is wooded, though it is seldom managed commercially. Over a recent ten-year period, about 1,270 acres was logged, with only nine acres clearcut. Only 1,993 acres are enrolled in the tree growth tax program, which requires a forest management plan.

Top recommendations of the agriculture/forestry section are to establish a conservation commission to promote good agriculture and forestry activities and help to promote technical assistance available from farm and forest organizations.

Chapter 7: Water Resources

Water resources include Sandy Pond and the various other waterbodies in town, as well as the groundwater aquifer. The purpose of this chapter is to identify any issues or threats to the quality of these waters.

Sandy Pond is the largest of the waterbodies at 440 acres, and is susceptible to pollution. Erosion from the watershed can lead to nutrient buildup in the lake, silt, and algae blooms. This can have a negative effect on property values. The pond is already showing the ill effects.

Ground water resources supply virtually all of the domestic water needs in Freedom. There are very few areas of town that can be considered an “aquifer” (supplying more than 10 gallons per minute) and there are no public water supply systems. Nor are there many threats to ground water quality.

Top recommendations from the water resources section focus on promoting and enforcing (where appropriate) best management practices for erosion control, including for new development.

Chapter 8: Critical Natural Resources

Land-based natural resources include wetlands, wildlife habitat, and scenic areas. The purpose of this chapter is to identify occurrences in Freedom and provide an appropriate level of protection from potential threats.

Freedom has the unusual status of having been alternately inundated by ocean waters and glaciers throughout history, so has many interesting landforms and good soils for agriculture. It has also resulted in many good wildlife habitats. A number of wetlands throughout the town have been identified as high-value waterfowl and wading bird habitats. These are primarily protected by the shoreland zoning ordinance. Four large deer wintering areas have been identified by the state. Although these need not be restricted from development, they can be managed in such a way as to protect the resource.

Top recommendations of the natural resource section include identifying current shoreland zone resource protection areas as critical resource areas and creating an open space plan to explore ways of protecting high value undeveloped areas.

Chapter 9: Recreation

Outdoor recreation is an important element of community life. While in a rural town such as Freedom, many recreation opportunities result from the generous allowance of access to private land, public land and community programs also play an important role. The town is served by a recreation committee to assist in overseeing these programs.

The center of outdoor recreation in Freedom is Freedom Park. The 3-acre tract includes a baseball diamond, basketball court, and picnic area. Freedom Field Days are held annually at the park. A public boat landing on Pleasant Street provides access to Sandy Pond.

Passive recreation includes hiking, cross-country skiing, hunting, and so on. The town has many discontinued roads, which form the backbone of a trail system. The town also benefits from the Sheepscot Wellspring Land Alliance and the Sebasticook Regional Land Trust, who manage tracts of land for open space and recreational access.

Top recommendations for improving outdoor recreation include preparing a recreation program master plan and including a recreational trail element in the proposed open space plan.

Chapter 10: Historic Resources

Freedom has a 200+ year history of development. There is some value in preserving the remnants of that history, both historical and archeological.

Freedom has a number of public buildings dating back 100 years or more. The original town meeting hall now houses the Freedom Historical Society. The current Freedom Congregational Church building dates from 1857. And the Dirigo Grange Hall, formerly a cheese factory, has been in grange hands since 1883. There are also a number of private buildings that date to the 19th century, but no complete inventory has been done of these.

Freedom has a very active historical society, seeking grants and financial assistance, and currently engaged in restoring the original town house. The town also maintains 14 cemeteries, valuable for historical and genealogical, as well as memorial purposes.

Recommendations for historical preservation include preparation of a complete community survey of historic and archeological resources, evaluation for inclusion in the national register of historic places, and protection of potential historic assets through regulation of new development.

Chapter 11: Public Facilities and Services

This chapter addresses the functions of local government. Its purpose is to evaluate how demand expected from increased population growth and other factors can be efficiently met by the town over the next couple decades.

The chapter profiles the structure of town government, the state of town-owned properties, the extent of emergency services, the educational system, solid waste management, and other public works and utilities. Included in the inventory is an assessment of the value of regional cooperation for services such as recycling, education, and emergency dispatching. The only currently-identifiable needs are a sand and salt shed, a tanker for the fire department, repair of the dam on Sandy Pond, and repaving and guardrail repair. The rate of population growth is not expected to tax any existing services. It was noted that cell phone coverage could be improved to support commercial development, but that is out of the town's jurisdiction.

Top recommendations for public services include identifying needed capital improvements and alternative sources of funding and researching/exploring ways to reduce municipal costs by more efficient utilization and regional service cooperation.

Chapter 12: Fiscal Capacity

This chapter addresses the financial capability of local government. Long term financial planning is critical to maintaining public services while keeping taxes stable. Anticipating revenue and expenditure trends is part of this planning.

Over the past two years, Freedom has experienced a healthy increase in tax base, which has permitted the mill rate to go down even as the revenue raised from taxes rose. The town has not had to vote to waive the state-mandated (LD1) limit. Over the five-year period from 2005 to 2009, overall expenditures rose by \$260,000, with almost half of that from the schools and \$38,000 from roads.

While the town has incurred some debt for capital expenditures, it is shared with other towns in the school system and not under town control. For big-money items, the town prefers to save rather than borrow, and has accounts for fire equipment, public works equipment, recreation, and road and bridge repair.

The plan establishes a schedule of capital investments with five items currently on it. The purpose of this schedule is to anticipate the expenditures in time to save for them or seek outside financial assistance. The plan recommends that this schedule be updated regularly by the selectmen, and to continue to seek ways to save money by regional sharing of major expenditures and services.

Chapter 13: Land Use

This chapter is divided into two sections: an analysis of existing land use patterns and limitations, and a plan for future land use.

Historically, Freedom was divided into two settlement patterns: rural farmsteads and industrial development along Sandy Stream. The latter led to growth of the village, but with the loss of the mills, the village also contracted. The vast majority of the population now lives in the

rural area, though most of them have little to do with farming. About one out of four homes built in the past four years have been on private roads.

Although the village is where public services are, such as the church, post office, and store, virtually no new homes have been built in or near the village for many years. This trend is supported by the townwide two-acre minimum lot size, which is contrary to the village style of development. In fact, with our current average of six new homes per year, the two-acre minimum requires at least 120 acres of land for new housing over the next ten years, plus almost two miles of road frontage.

The result of this trend is increased local costs for road maintenance, school bussing, fire protection, and other services. This must be weighed against the rights of landowners to buy and sell land and develop where they want. Add to that factors such as the aging population (people will want to have smaller properties and closer to services) and rising gas prices, and we have a need to plan for a change in how the town develops. Not planning would mean a decline in new development combined with increasing public service costs.

The plan recommends designation of two areas in which we will encourage more growth: the existing village area and a new village growth area. The village growth area is about 130 acres north and west of the existing village. Encouraging new development in this area will expand the village and allow us to focus future public improvements in a smaller area.

The plan recommends (but does not specify) that the town provide incentives for development in the growth areas. This could include smaller lot requirements, affordable or senior-oriented housing, and subdivisions. It is also recommended that the town adopt an ordinance to give it authority to approve new commercial development.

In rural areas, the plan recommends discouraging random development, primarily by strengthening farming and other rural occupations, and promoting open space. A new municipal committee would actively promote rural economic activity, and the town would develop an open space plan to identify voluntary conservation opportunities. Also, town ordinances would be changed to discourage the town from accepting new private roads.

Chapter 14: Regional Coordination

A separate chapter in the plan is devoted to exploring opportunities for better coordination with other towns in our area. Though Freedom is situated in a rural and isolated area, we have plenty of chances to accomplish more for less working together with our neighbors. Areas in which we can cooperate include: public facilities, where we will meet annually with neighboring towns on joint ventures; natural resources, where we can work on land protection, habitat, and watershed issues; the economy, joining with regional economic development organizations; housing, to promote an affordable housing initiative; recreation, to expand trail networks and land trusts; and transportation, to advocate for new transportation infrastructure.