



BAR HARBOR 2035 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

*Created by the Bar Harbor Planning Department
May 15, 2025*

1. What is a comprehensive plan and why is it important?

A comprehensive plan is a clear statement of the community's long-range (10+ year) vision for the future. It provides a way for a municipality to plan for and respond to change. A comprehensive plan is intended to be a "living document" that is reviewed and updated as necessary to adjust to changes in the community over time. This type of plan covers a wide array of topics to ensure a town's growth and development is able to meet the needs of residents, businesses, and visitors.

2. What vision and direction does the Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan set for the next 10+ years?

The Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan sets a vision for the Town to be a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable year-round community by addressing challenges like housing, tourism, infrastructure, and natural resource protection. Over the next 10 years, the Plan aims to 1) focus most new development into areas already served by public infrastructure; 2) protect the residential areas; 3) support more affordable housing options for local workers and families; and 4) ensure Bar Harbor stays livable for both residents and visitors. The Plan emphasizes working together as a community to shape growth that respects the Town's identity, natural beauty, and quality of life.

3. What does the Comprehensive Plan say about protecting the environment?

There is a section in the Plan dedicated to Stewardship of Resources, found on pages 53-64. Stewardship of Resources outlines the importance of preserving natural resources, including but not limited to, Eagle Lake, the Northeast Creek watershed, the night skies, and marine resources. It also identifies the importance of preserving archaeological sites and ensuring the Town is prepared for the future impacts of climate change. In the Implementation Plan, there are 54 actions dedicated to Stewardship of Resources.



4. What does the Comprehensive Plan say about ensuring quality and quantity of water in the rural areas of Town?

Page 35 of the Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan identifies the importance of protecting the Town’s rural areas and water quality. Additionally, page 61 discusses the priority to protect water quality and quantity. In the Implementation Plan, there are multiple actions dedicated to the protection of the quantity and quality of water resources, including actions 2.9, 2.10, 2.13, 2.14, and 2.14B. As of April 2025, the Planning Department has already started work on some of these actions. Please refer to the recording of the April 15 Town Council Meeting for an update on the 2025 Planning Department Workplan, which includes a section on Stewardship of Resources.

5. What does “amenity trap” mean and why is it mentioned in the Comprehensive Plan?

An “amenity trap” is a term defined in the 2023 report by Headwaters Economics as the “paradox of a place with natural attractions that make it a great place to live but also threaten it with being loved to death.” Page 18 of the Comprehensive Plan further describes the term’s relevance by stating, “more people are visiting and moving to places with inspiring natural amenities, and that this influx of visitors and new residents brings economic opportunities. These opportunities often result in a positive feedback loop encouraging new businesses and services to make the community even more attractive to future visitors and residents. However, for many communities, this loop often results in some serious drawbacks, including increased pressure on existing infrastructure, growing inequality, and dramatic increases in housing costs that force long-time residents out. Fiscal health, public discourse, and community well-being all can suffer because of these challenges.”

As Bar Harbor is mentioned in the report, it is crucial for the Town to accept the reality of being an amenity trap in order to effectively create a future where residents and visitors have access to shared resources without causing unnecessary strain to community members, services, and infrastructure.

The report described above can be found here: <https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/2023HE-Amenity-Report-R3b-LOWRES.pdf>



6. How will this Plan balance year-round and seasonal needs in an equitable and sustainable way?

The 2035 Comprehensive Plan’s vision statement has a sentence dedicated to this need for balance, stating: “Together, we build upon our diverse economic strengths and through partnerships we create solutions that meet year-round and seasonal needs.” More information about this statement can be found on page 21 of the Comprehensive Plan.

This sentiment is mentioned throughout the Comprehensive Plan in each of the six Planning Themes, especially in the Housing Solutions, People Centered Transportation, Community Infrastructure and Services, and Diverse Economy themes.

Most notably, this Comprehensive Plan identifies the need for tourism management, as identified on page 91, which should be “mutually beneficial” and “equitable.” Page 91 further describes four key objectives of a tourism management strategy which states, “[t]he benefits must not be limited to one segment of the community (i.e. business community) to the expense of the other (i.e. year-round residents).”

7. What does the Future Land Use Strategy, especially the designated growth areas, mean for how LD 2003 is implemented?

The previous LD 2003 bill became state law in 2022, and removed unnecessary regulatory barriers to housing production in Maine. This law requires municipalities to allow for a higher minimum density of homes (dwelling units) on a given property. However, this additional density is limited to designated growth areas in the majority of the law’s provisions. Designated growth areas are identified by a Town’s Comprehensive Plan or by the availability of public water and sewer. In June 2024, Bar Harbor voters passed the “Increased Housing Opportunities” amendment, which made the Land Use Ordinance compliant with LD 2003.

The 2007 Comprehensive Plan identifies designated growth areas that include Downtown, Hulls Cove, Town Hill, Hadley Point, and Salisbury Cove. Under this Comprehensive Plan, all of these areas are required to allow the increased minimum density.

The Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan takes a slightly different approach and proposes only Downtown and Hulls Cove as designated growth areas, considering their connection to Town water and sewer. Meanwhile, it identifies Town Hill as an ideal location for growth, but due to its lack of connection to Town water and sewer, it is not appropriate to be identified as a designated growth area. This logic also applies to Hadley Point and Salisbury Cove. This change in designation keeps Town Hill, Hadley Point, and Salisbury Cove from being included in the majority of the higher minimum densities required by LD 2003. For more information, the Future Land Use Strategy can be found on pages 24 to 35 of the Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan.



8. How will this Plan accommodate growth? What kind of growth does this plan recommend?

The Bar Harbor 2035 Plan was shaped by the community. Through several engagement events, the Future Land Use Strategy was created to guide future development growth in alignment with the community's future Vision. The Land Use Strategy identifies where the majority of development growth should occur in the next 10 to 15 years and which areas should remain more rural. Development growth refers to a mix of land uses, the majority being residential, commercial, and social/institutional uses. The identified designated growth areas mentioned in the Plan are the Hulls Cove Village areas and Downtown areas. These areas will be the focus of new development. Development could still happen in the more rural areas of Town, especially considering the Town's significant need for more housing. However, the majority of housing growth would be encouraged and incentivized in the areas with water and sewer infrastructure, as reflected in the designated growth areas. Overall, this Land Use Strategy is meant to avoid sprawling development that could threaten natural resources and to incentivize housing in the most appropriate places. This approach protects the integrity of existing rural areas while allowing for modest increases in density where appropriate, using "gentle density" strategies compatible with rural neighborhood character.

9. What is gentle density?

Gentle density, within the context of the Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan, represents a balanced approach to meet the Town's housing and environmental protection goals. Gentle density refers to small increases in the allowed housing unit density in the more rural areas in Town. This approach ensures housing development remains in scale with single-family homes and within rural neighborhood character. Gentle density can be implemented by adjusting zoning regulations to allow accessory dwelling units, two- to four-family homes, and small-scale apartments. This concept could be especially beneficially in Town due to the current and rising cost of land. By allowing gentle density, more residents could construct additional units to offset the rising costs of living and property taxes, in addition to moving closer to the community's rental housing unit target.

Examples of gentle density are shown on the following page.

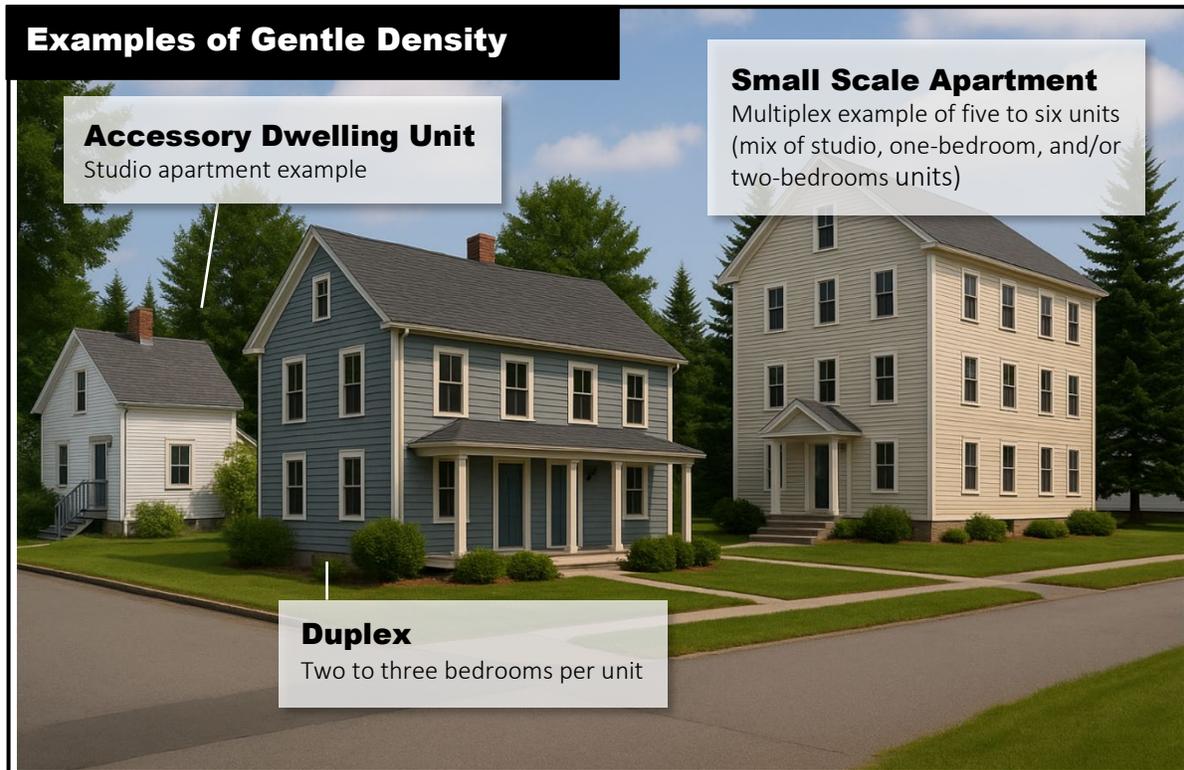


Figure 1. This image was created by AI. These three housing structures represent what gentle density could look like in rural areas of Town.

10. How will the Plan protect residential areas?

The Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan prioritizes housing and its community in a number of ways. As part of the overall comprehensive planning effort, a housing study was completed to provide more context and guidance on the Town’s housing shortage. The lack of housing and declining affordability were likely the most significant challenges mentioned throughout the Plan. Increasing the housing stock is integral to the future of the community and to reach the 2035 Vision and Future Land Use Strategy. Any community that has local zoning is required by state law to have a plan, such as a comprehensive plan, to guide zoning changes. Any zoning change cannot be inconsistent with an adopted comprehensive plan. The Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan prioritizes housing as the most significant issue for the Town to address. Granted, many issues overlap with the lack of housing and declining affordability, but housing is the common denominator for most of the Town’s other big issues, if not all. Once the Bar Harbor 2035 Comprehensive Plan is adopted, future zoning changes should prioritize year-round housing preservation and/or growth in some form, whether that be incentivizing housing development, ensuring existing residents retain affordability, balancing seasonal housing needs with the year-round needs, or other adjacent efforts. Additionally, the Implementation Plan includes actions within the Housing Solutions and Regulatory Revisions sections about how to ensure affordability for existing year-round residents and how to encourage housing growth.



11. How will the Comprehensive Plan be implemented?

The Plan's implementation was a high priority for the Comprehensive Planning Committee. The committee decided on a 22-page implementation matrix. This matrix lists general actions outlining how the Plan could be implemented. A key component being the creation of an implementation committee. This committee, would recommend action priorities to ensure efficient progress towards the community's overall vision for the future. This group would facilitate a collaborative process to ensure all the necessary players are involved and/or engaged, thus aligning its efforts with the Vision and Future Land Use Strategy.