

Preserving and Promoting a Working Harbor: The Experience of Gloucester, Massachusetts

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Introduction

For nearly 400 years, Gloucester Harbor has been the center of one of the country's most important commercial fishing communities. For generations, its piers have been lined with fishing vessels and the waterfront dominated by facilities and services supporting the seafood industry. Over the past two decades, as groundfish stocks have declined and management measures designed to rebuild the stocks have reduced the size and effort of the fleet, the shoreside infrastructure has deteriorated and businesses that depend on groundfish have struggled, contracted, or vanished.

As a matter of land and water use policy, the City of Gloucester and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts have been steadfast in maintaining Gloucester Harbor as a commercial fishing and marine industrial waterfront. Over the past two decades, this objective has been supported and pursued through capital investments, strong regulatory controls, and a variety of economic and social service programs.

A plan for Gloucester Harbor prepared in 1999 recommended, as a principal strategy, public investments in waterfront infrastructure as the means to ensure the future operational viability of the harbor. A number of such improvements were made which have enhanced the capacity of the port and improved the facilities and services available to the fishermen. However, this strategy did not directly address the needs of the owners of waterfront properties whose businesses, e.g., processing, provisioning, repair, are largely dependent on the commercial fish harvesters. In fact, to some degree, public investments to improve and expand state and city owned piers and dockage and in supporting the creation of the Gloucester Display Auction, increased competition for the private businesses.

A planning process to update the 1999 Gloucester Harbor Plan was undertaken recently by the City of Gloucester with the assistance of the Urban Harbors Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston. The overall goals of the updated plan remain the same as in 1999, but the plan needed to confront one important consequence of the long decline in and uncertain future of groundfishing: the deterioration of and an inability or unwillingness of private property owners to invest in maintaining and improving waterfront infrastructure and businesses. The ultimate goal is to ensure that Gloucester's waterfront will be available and functional when groundfish stocks recover, as is anticipated, to levels that will allow sustainable harvesting in the future.

Gloucester Harbor

Though Gloucester Harbor supports a mix of activities, its land and water area are dominated by industrial uses. This is a consequence of the harbor's long history as a

fishing port and of land use and tidelands regulations that strongly favor water-dependent industrial uses. Over 70 percent of the waterfront is in industrial use, with the majority of that being water-dependent. Gloucester Harbor is one of a declining number of ports that still offer the full range of facilities and services essential to the fishing industry: fuel and ice supply, processing, marine supply, vessel repair, cold storage/freezing, and a seafood auction. There is approximately 2,600 linear feet of wharf frontage in lengths from 220 to 1,000 feet, with dockside water depths between 18 and 23 feet (MLW). In addition, there is dock space for about 260 commercial vessels and 280 recreational vessels. Another 20 berths are used for short-term dockage associated with vessel servicing. There are also 126 moorings in the harbor for commercial, recreational and transient boats.

Unlike many ports, most of the land area, about 85 percent, is privately-owned. Of the publicly owned waterfront property, about half is the State Fish Pier; the remainder consists of several city properties improved for commercial fishing boat dockage or for public access, and a US Coast Guard base. The harbor's publicly owned docks and wharves used by the commercial fleet and the privately owned marinas used for recreational boats are in relatively good condition, due to recent public investments. Many of the privately-owned docks and wharves presently or traditionally used for commercial vessels are badly deteriorated and in need of major renovation.

Nearly the entire waterfront of Gloucester Harbor has been zoned Marine Industrial since at least 1969. In 1978, the Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management Program applied a "Designated Port Area" (DPA) classification to virtually the same area. Both of these regulatory districts give priority to water-dependent industrial uses and, most significantly, prohibit new residential and most recreational boating facilities.

The Issues

As the management measures instituted by the New England Fisheries Management Council have reduced the size and level of effort of the commercial fishing fleet, the amount (both value and volume) of groundfish being landed in Gloucester has declined significantly from the early 1980s. While the management measures are designed to restore groundfish stocks to levels that will support a sustainable fishery, any recovery is still years away.

The viability of many businesses on the Gloucester waterfront has been and remains tied to the health of the commercial fisheries. During this downturn in groundfish landings some waterfront businesses have diversified into other fisheries or other non-fishing related marine businesses. This diversification provides some waterfront property owners with income that is not dependent on groundfishing and serves to keep essential port infrastructure and services in place. However, other waterfront property owners feel squeezed between the limited economic potential of marine industrial uses and the public policies and land use/tidelands regulations that limit alternative development. Without an economically viable business, property owners are unable, and lending institutions unwilling, to invest in capital improvements needed to maintain piers, wharves and other waterfront infrastructure. The consequence is that facilities and businesses essential to Gloucester's ability to eventually reap the benefits of rebuilt groundfish stocks may be lost.

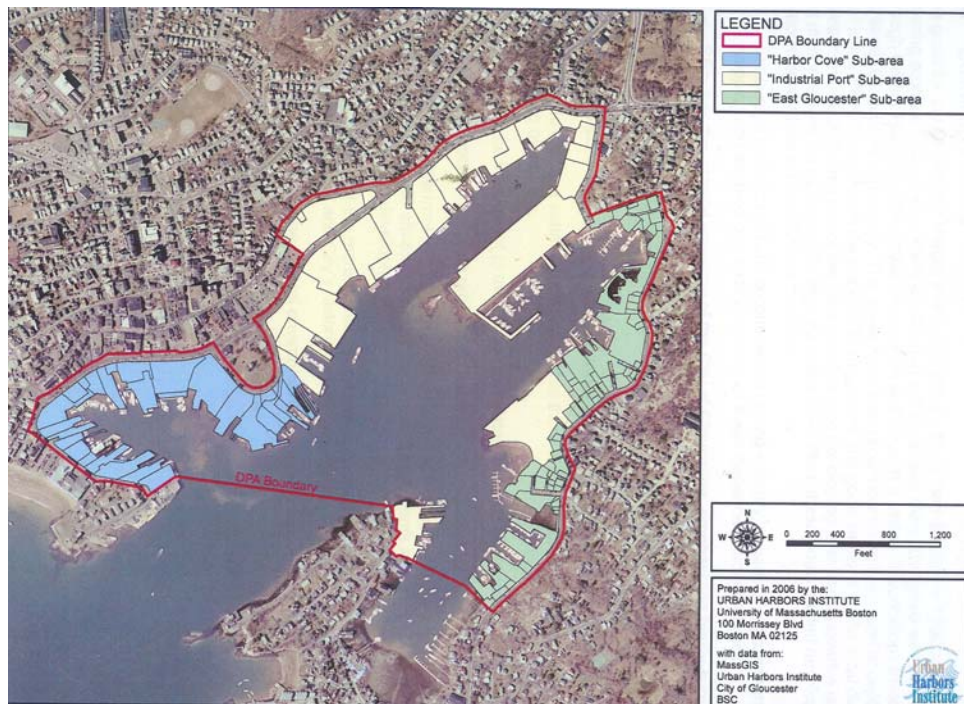
The 2006 Gloucester Harbor Plan

The 2006 Gloucester Harbor Plan presents a strategy for preserving and strengthening the working waterfront while providing property owners with opportunities for economic development.

Two of the plan's principal recommendations are relevant here. The first is to revise city and state regulations applicable to the Gloucester Harbor waterfront to provide property owners with a broader range of economic opportunities to provide new revenue streams, support the on-site maritime activities, and maintain the capacity and infrastructure needed for future water-dependent growth. These revisions also produce greater consistency between city and state regulations. Second, the plan recommends that the city consolidate port, industry and economic development expertise and responsibility within one department to encourage and coordinate investment in and revitalization of the waterfront infrastructure and to help expedite permitting processes.

Regulatory Revisions

The first change to the existing regulatory regime is a partitioning of the harbor waterfront into three areas based on the predominant land and water uses and the physical constraints and opportunities for water-dependent or alternative uses, as identified by the plan. So, rather than one zoning district covering the entire waterfront, three districts were devised—Harbor Cove, Industrial Port, and East Gloucester. All maintain controls to preserve water-dependent industrial activities, but allow variation in terms of the mix and intensity of other supporting uses that may be allowed. As an example, Harbor Cove is the heart of the historical commercial fishing industry in Gloucester. While it still provides important dock space for fishing vessels, the compactness of the area, small parcel sizes, narrow roadways and proximity to the downtown make it functionally obsolete for most modern marine industries.



The state, under the Public Waterfront Act (Mass. General Laws, Chapter 91) and its corresponding Waterways Regulations (310 CMR 9.00), also exercises permitting authority over the use of waterways including waterfront land that was created by placing fill in former tidelands. Within areas of the state's coast identified by the Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management Program as "Designated Port Areas," including Gloucester Harbor, the Waterways Regulations give highest priority to water-dependent industrial uses and prohibit uses inconsistent with this objective. A degree of flexibility is provided in the regulations for uses defined as "Supporting DPA Uses." Certain nonwater-dependent industrial and commercial uses that provide direct economic or operational support to water-dependent industrial uses may qualify as Supporting DPA Uses and occupy up to 25 percent of a project site. Further, if a community prepares a state-approved DPA Master Plan (the Gloucester Harbor Plan), the area that can be devoted to supporting commercial uses can be as much as 25 percent of the entire land area of the DPA.

The Gloucester Harbor Plan/DPA Master Plan takes full advantage of the opportunity presented by this provision of the state regulations. Consistent with the specific objectives of each of the three waterfront zoning districts discussed above, the plan establishes revised standards for the type and amount of supporting commercial and industrial uses to be allowed in each area. In the district where marine industrial uses are to be the priority activity, the plan allows only a minimal amount of supporting uses. In the Harbor Cove area, which is proposed to become more of a mixed use area, a maximum amount of supporting use, up to 65 percent of the parcel, is permitted. This infusion of commercial uses is intended to provide property owners with a new source of income to help them maintain waterfront infrastructure for commercial fishing, link the downtown with the waterfront, and attract the visiting public to experience a working waterfront, but without displacing water-dependent industrial use of the water frontage.

Harbor Administration

The city's Community Development Department (CDD) is part of the executive branch of city government with overall responsibility for coordinating the physical growth and economic development of the city. Gloucester Harbor is and always has been an important part of the City's economic base, but harbor planning and implementation has been the responsibility of a separate office partly because it is funded by different sources and partly because port and waterfront development requires specialized expertise. The Harbor Plan proposes a consolidation of economic development and port expertise and responsibility within the CDD to better integrate the functions, broaden the types of assistance provided to waterfront property and business owners, and coordinate efforts to revitalize and market the Port of Gloucester with other economic development goals of the city.

Value of this experience for other waterfront communities

The city remains committed to its maritime heritage in planning for the future of the harbor. While its commercial fishing industry weathers the limitations imposed by fisheries management regulations, the city takes steps to (1) ensure that the waterfront and its infrastructure are maintained and available for the time when the stocks are restored to levels that support sustainable harvesting, and (2) private property owners and

businesses are provided with incentives and regulatory flexibility designed to produce increased economic development and financial return.

Specifically, city and state regulations are to be revised in a coordinated, complementary manner to:

- maintain provisions favoring water-dependent industrial use of the waterfront;
- preserve the activities and infrastructure essential to Gloucester's future functioning as a full-service regional hub port;
- increase economic development of the waterfront by expanding opportunities for diversification and investments that will generate greater economic return for property owners; and
- increase predictability (and efficiency) in the local and state permitting processes.

In addition, it was determined that a consolidation of the city's community development and harbor development expertise and capabilities would be more effective in ensuring the long-term economic vitality of the port.