

Introduction

What is now Acton was part of a much larger tract of land in southwestern Maine purchased in 1661 by Francis Small from Chief Sunday of the Newichawannock Tribe. In 1771, the name "Hubbardstown Plantation" was given to the area now made up of Acton and Shapleigh.

In 1776, the first settlement of Acton Corner was made by Benjamin Kines, Clement Steele and John York -- all of York, Maine. These settlers were soon followed by Captain William Reeves, who built the bridge across the narrows of Mousam Lake and a house nearby. Settlement of the areas occurred more rapidly once a new road was constructed between the Lebanon town line and the Little Ossipee River.

The town's abundance of good waterpower led to the establishment of a number of mill operations. The first mill in town was a grist mill, built in 1779 on the Salmon Falls River near Wakefield by Joseph Parsons. Home's Mill became the home of a sawmill in 1790 and a grist mill in 1830. A hemp mill, carding mill, felting mill and additional sawmills also operated during the 1800s. A shoe factory located above the Brackett Bridge employed 200 people and operated until the 1920s. The building was later used for cloth manufacturing.

In 1785, Hubbardstown Plantation was incorporated as a town and given the name Shapleigh, after an early proprietor. In 1828, a proposition was approved dividing Shapleigh into two individual townships. An act of incorporation was passed in 1830 and the town of Acton was born.

The Shapleigh and Acton Agricultural Society was formed in 1866, and began sponsoring an annual fair and cattle show. A permanent site for the fair in Acton was established in 1889 and the fair has been held there ever since.

Acton's commercial history was highlighted by two rather unique engineering feats: construction of the Great East Canal and the Acton Silver Mines. The Great East Canal, part of a system of dams and waterworks that controls water flow on the Salmon Falls, was constructed during the 1850s and 60s. The 3/4-mile canal was blasted through ledge and included a granite archway at the bridge crossing.

During the later 1800s, a number of silver mines were developed in South Acton near Goding Brook and the Lebanon town line. During this era, there was a surge of interest nation-wide in gold and silver mining, and after the discovery of a significant silver vein in Acton in 1877, a series of mine shafts were drilled. Mining activity peaked during the 1880s and declined thereafter, leading to abandonment of the mines. Today, a series of water-filled shafts and building foundations are still evident.

Acton's population declined throughout much of the later 1800s and early 1900s as a migration west and to urban areas began. It was not until 1960 that the population began to grow again, fueled by new residents seeking a rural community within commuting distance of jobs.

Today, the town has several distinct personalities: as a rural community with large amounts of open space and a few surviving resource-based enterprises such as apple orchards and gravel pits; as a summer resort community with a significant influx of summer residents on the lakes; and increasingly, as a bedroom community of Sanford and other employment centers.

It is this rural atmosphere and the relationship of Acton to it's surrounding communities and the region which has begun to change over the past decade. Acton and the communities around it –including Shapleigh, Lebanon, Alfred and Newfield - are becoming popular places to live for a variety of reasons. First they are close to Sanford and provide employment opportunities within a short drive of a number of large employers. Secondly, it has become obvious over the last decade that people are more willing to drive greater distances for work than at any time perhaps in our history. Thus, a family might move to Acton and have one or both spouses working in a place such as Portsmouth or Portland as well. Third, housing affordability (or the purchase of land) is more a reality for people wishing to live in Acton than places south of Sanford (although this is rapidly changing). Finally, Acton offers small town character, lakes, and wonderful natural areas while not being entirely remote. It is, in effect, becoming less rural, yet is still not suburban (even by Maine standards).

Some of the recent development activity points to these trends and the desirability of Acton as a place to live for folks who wish to move to a more rural setting (whether from Portland or Massachusetts). This combined with what may be the move of many lakeside cottage owners to winterize and make Acton more than just a summer home has tremendous implications for the town.

Through this Comprehensive Plan the town hopes to address many of these issues and plot a course to maintain the character and culture of Acton.

Comprehensive Planning in Acton

Acton adopted a Comprehensive Plan in 1991 during the first round of planning grants under the 1988 Growth Management Act. The plan was found to be consistent at that time by the Maine State Planning Office.. The plan laid out an area for village type development, a transitional growth area and a rural growth area. The village zone was designated for one acre minimum lot sizes, a transitional growth area of 1.5 acre lot sizes, and rural zones of 2 acre minimums. An area for light industrial and commercial growth was also delineated.

While the plan was easily adopted at Town Meeting the implementation of the plan was not as smooth. Due to citizen opposition to the one acre minimum lot sizes in the “village”, the zoning changes were easily defeated. Thus the town has ended up in the place where it was prior to 1991 – with two acre minimum lot sizes throughout the town and “floating” commercial and industrial zones.

In 2002, a new Comprehensive Planning Committee was formed to examine the existing plan, and devise a new plan to take to voters once again. In 2003 the town also

applied for and received a grant from the Maine State Planning Office to help with the development of the plan. These efforts have resulted in the plan that follows.

Rather than going into the detail of the first plan, this effort focuses more on policies and strategies which might be implemented upon adoption of the plan (rather than a elaborate and exhaustive inventory of town resources and infrastructure). The Committee was mindful of the failings of the last growth management effort and wished to ensure that any recommendations to arise from the plan could later be implemented through zoning, subdivision and other non-regulatory means.

Comprehensive Plan Survey

A small survey of residents was conducted to determine community opinion regarding growth and development. Rather than mailing a survey, the Committee handed surveys out at Town meetings, at corner stores and at Town Hall and asked residents to respond. In all, about 12% of the towns residents responded to the survey. The actual survey can be seen on the following pages. Opinions are summarized below:

Why do you live in Acton?

For the most part respondents lived in Acton because attractiveness of the town, low crime rate, low taxes and the sense of community. Less important were issues such a proximity to employment and family considerations.

Growth and development

Residents were very concerned that open space, natural areas and community character are being lost to development. There was not as much (or little concern) about the lack of affordable housing. There was also concern about the town's ability to pay for capital improvements over the next decade. Residents also seemed to favor large lot zoning over more compact development pattern yet when asked the question in a different way, stated a preference for higher density development near an existing village (which may signify a need for more education about the issue). There was however, a preference for cluster development as compared to standard two- acre lot sizes.

Town planning

There was support for impact fees to help pay for needed infrastructure. There was also fairly strong support for adopting a minimum lot size for rural areas that exceeded the current two- acre minimum. Conversely there was little support for adopting a growth area of less than two acres (the reason the last zoning ordinance revision was defeated). Similarly there was little support for encouraging a broad mix of housing types.

Environmental

There was strong support for working with the newly formed Land Trust in the region and for a more active town role in protecting sensitive natural resources including the lakes and their water quality. There was even support for spending town tax dollars on the purchase of open space. There was also interest in developing a system of bikeways, trails and pedestrian paths.

Commercial and economic development

There was strong support for encouraging home based businesses and also for establishing a zone for essential services such as hardware stores, small grocery stores and professional services. Residents did not seem interested in encouraging commercial and industrial growth.

Town character

There was nearly universal support in maintaining a K-8 school in Acton. Most residents, when presented a choice stated they would most like to see Acton students attend Sanford High School and that the town strongly needed to make a permanent arrangement to send their students somewhere.