

Community Vision Statement

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Looking Back

Situated on the elbow of Cape Cod and surrounded on three sides by water, Chatham has always had its face turned toward the sea. As a consequence, its history has been one of geographical isolation and of dealing with the ocean's forces. Chatham prides itself in being an independent community whose spirit has been shaped throughout history by a unique relationship of land and water.

When the first people set foot on the Cape some 12,000 years ago, the landscape was vastly different from today's. Following herds of caribou through a harsh land left by the great glacier's retreat, they probably traveled up the coast which extended miles seaward of where it is today and encompassed George's Bank, as well as Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. These nomads conceivably witnessed the formation of the multitude of kettle ponds which dot the landscape today.

Millennia of rising seas obliterated most traces of these early inhabitants and radically altered the Cape's shoreline. As the climate warmed, the land evolved. Sandy beaches and bars, marshlands, and estuaries were created, and the people we know as the Monomoyicks established a way of life not greatly different from that of the area's European settlers. For at least three thousand years prior to the Mayflower's landing on Cape Cod, the native population sustained themselves largely from shellfishing, hunting, fishing, and gathering. Their success was evident to Henry David Thoreau who wrote:

... Shells, opened by the Indians, were strewn all over the Cape. Indeed, the Cape was at first thickly settled by Indians on account of the abundance of these and other fish ... I picked up half a dozen arrow-heads, and ... could have filled my pockets with them.

From "Cape Cod" by Henry David Thoreau

With the abundance of the coast, horticulture and agriculture remained secondary for the Monomoyicks, as it did for the colonists. It was not long after 1664, when William Nickerson and his family first came to Chatham, that the small number of families who came to live here realized that the land was not profitable for farming or forestry.

Instead they had to look to the waters of Pleasant Bay, the Atlantic, and Nantucket Sound, and to the scores of salt water inlets and fresh water ponds for their survival. Through four early migrations the settlers endured a harsh environment that threatened their existence, and turned to fin and shellfishing, whaling, and commerce for their livelihood. Knowledge and tradition were carefully handed down through families, and the hardships of their lives

and occupations continued to keep the community small and closely knit, even when they enjoyed a small measure of prosperity.

In the late 1800s, Chatham's popularity as a summer resort blossomed as the splendid isolation and natural beauty known to the town's inhabitants was discovered by people from Boston and New York. Many of them purchased tracts of land and built large homes, but they also brought with them a conservation ethic that recognized the importance of retaining Chatham's historical identity as well as its still unspoiled miles of shoreline and waterfront settings. Even with the advent of rail and automobile traffic and the building of resort hotels, the community continued well into the twentieth century to be a small fishing village with a population no greater than 100 years before.

In the period following World War II, changes began to test whether Chatham's continuing link to the past would be able to survive. With better highways, greater affluence and a wish to retreat from the problems of city life and urban sprawl, summer visitors and retirees soon saw Chatham as a mecca: a small town whose sense of community and pristine environment at the edge of the sea was now a much-desired commodity.

The immediate effect was a burgeoning year-round population, which exploded during the summer months, accompanied—as might be expected—by continuing development of new houses and businesses. Growth was tempered, however, by the same factors which lay in Chatham's history for over 250 years: a conservation ethic which sought to protect and retain a dwindling open space; a preservation ethic which cherished the historical attributes and scale of the typical New England village; and the continued sense, if now largely spiritual, of a town set apart from its neighbors.

Chatham Today

Chatham's spiritual, perceptual, and to a certain extent, geographic sense of isolation continues to shape its outlook and response to outside forces. Although Chatham is no longer a "small New England fishing village," the desire to remain a small and close-knit community guides many of the aspects of life within the Town.

Chatham's off-the-beaten-path location has meant that it has escaped from many of the overwhelming development pressures experienced by other Cape towns. Those that come here choose to do so — it is difficult to drive through Chatham on the way to another destination. Development has taken place, although more slowly and with somewhat better control than elsewhere. Chatham still retains its village character with its Cape Cod style, its distinct neighborhood centers, its small, intimate building scale, "walkability," community gathering places, monuments and museums which sustain its connection to the past, and perhaps most importantly, its strong relationship with the sea.

The tremendous changes since World War II, have not bypassed Chatham completely. The Town has undergone significant alteration, transforming itself from a fishing village and resort into a retirement and tourist destination. The fishing industry is threatened. In summer the population triples.

Many of the changes resulted from national trends that started after World War II and are continuing: escalating population and residential development. Each decade since the War, a thousand year-round residents have settled in

Chatham, tripling the population since 1945. Over three thousand houses have been built since 1960, more than doubling their numbers. Today, half of the houses are seasonal, and about a third of the adults are retired.

Residential growth has eaten up land. Over half the land in town has been developed for residential use compared to one fifth before the war. With commercial development following residential, open space has dwindled from over sixty percent of the land to less than thirty percent just since 1960. Loss of open land has meant more than numbers — it has meant more roads and the virtual disappearance of cart paths and dirt lanes, more traffic and demand on natural resources, loss of land for public use, the blocking of views from the hills and along the lakes and ocean shores, and the near disappearance of agriculture. The wide open and country look Chatham had early in the century has given way to a wooded and suburban appearance.

The increased population has also brought with it economic diversity and growth. The construction industry has flourished. The retired population — which has blossomed in recent decades — brings with it economic and cultural stimulation. The ever-increasing tourist industry has created business and jobs. Despite the problems of seasonal employment, the decline in fishing and agriculture, and high housing costs, residents' economic opportunities have broadened with population growth.

While other Cape towns have suffered from economic growth, with strip development bleeding commercial centers and destroying community character, Chatham has fared reasonably well. Strip and franchise development have been moderate, thanks in part to Chatham's not being a town tourists cruise through. Our downtown is a thriving village. While some residents say it is geared too much to tourism and that crowds and traffic squeeze them out in summer, the downtown still has its village character and is the envy of many other Cape communities.

A collective vision for Chatham is difficult to derive primarily because of the diversity of the population. The tight-knit village of 7,000 that shop and go to school, work, church, and Town Hall, blooms to 25,000 in a summer season that has grown beyond its traditional perimeters of Memorial Day to Labor Day.

There are several distinct populations which make up Chatham's character. Year-rounders encompass those who have lived by these shores for generations and "washashores" who have come to work or retire here. This is the participatory group — they dig clams, longline for fish, heal the sick, own or man the shops/restaurants/motels, clean the houses, write the wills, fix the cars, teach the children, build the houses, visit the Council on Aging, serve on committees, vote in elections, and wrangle and compromise at dozens of town meetings. They are the base, they have picked the course, and they feel that Chatham belongs to them.

There are the summer people, some fifty percent of whom are landowners and taxpayers and many of whom have been summering here for generations. Annually, the year-rounders welcome them back as friends and acquaintances. Their desire is for Chatham to remain always as they know it, because even if they can't vote, Chatham also belongs to them.

And there are the renting tourists and the day trippers, who flock to the beaches, the stores, the band concert, the restaurants, the lighthouse. They bring the summer economy, the summer problems and remind us, by their sheer desire to come here, that we must plan for them. Chatham belongs to them too.

As diverse as Chatham's population is, there is agreement: people are happy with the Town and want it to stay the way it is. There is great concern that Chatham not fall victim to development forces which would deteriorate its

uniqueness and turn it into Anyplace, USA. When asked, visitors, residents and part-time residents almost all have opinions on how things could be improved. But the overriding concern is for Chatham to hold onto what it has and ward off changes which could undermine its character and beauty.

Chatham has weathered change as well as it has partly because of its luck of being off the beaten path and partly because people care about the town and have invested their time in it. Chatham's growth has been guided by the people who live here. Individuals have been able, and continue to be able, to "make a difference" in their town, and they continue to be sensitive to the wishes and desires of all of the population. For Chatham to preserve those aspects of life that are cherished and important to all, to retain its special sense of community, and to foster growth that is appropriate to the town requires careful management and a collective vision of the future.

Guiding the Future

The initial step in the development of a Comprehensive Plan, is to identify what people feel would threaten the existing quality of life that they so clearly want to preserve. Then, if we can articulate and agree upon what we see as our collective goals, we can find the proper tools and solutions to enable us to achieve these goals.

In some cases, however, what is important to one group might be in conflict with what is important to another. Recreational use of our waters, for example, can be in conflict with shellfishing; increased tourism, which keeps our economy alive, takes its toll in traffic congestion.

If anything is clear, it is that Chathamites strongly desire a quality of life based upon the continuing historical presence and character of a small town with its overriding feeling of Cape Cod — human scale, a seaside atmosphere and physical beauty. They firmly want to protect against those things that would threaten that way of life, chief among those being:

- increased dominance of the automobile encouraging strip development, requiring more parking lots, undermining the character of neighborhood centers and threatening the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists.
- the possible loss of the fishing industry which is important not only to the economy of the town but also to its character and history.
- an ever-increasing influx of people, especially during summer months, giving residents the perception of being crowded out.
- decreasing ability to get to and enjoy the waterfront because of erosion, development and the demands of often competitive uses.
- dwindling open land and scenic vista.
- increase in pollution to the detriment of estuaries, lakes, streams and shellfish beds.

- loss of historic features and structures through development and neglect.

In many respects, a plan that emphasizes preserving Chatham's best qualities will focus upon those things that constitute a threat to these qualities. Yet, it cannot be ignored that real and immediate problems — such as maintaining reasonable government services — are not simply tied to preservation, but address needs that will require financial and community support.

People are clearly concerned with aspects of their daily existence that may not in the past have even been thought about or questioned, but which in today's world — even on Cape Cod — are easily recognized as being critical to the fabric of our lives, namely:

- the purity of our air and water
- the preservation of natural systems
- the safety of our streets and homes from crime and physical violence
- retaining a sense of community in which people get involved
- affordable housing
- quality public services and facilities such as schools, libraries, and human services
- jobs and economic opportunity on a year-round basis

The Comprehensive Plan is an effort to preserve the very best of Chatham and check those forces that would diminish it as a special place. Our challenges are to strike a balance among the interests of Chatham's population — year-round and summer, retirees and workers, children and adults — and to find the means whereby our goals can be achieved.

What we have seen as we looked back into Chatham's past and carried this vision forward to the present day is a rich historical continuity that blends old families and traditions, summer residents and “washashores”, into a small seaside town whose identity and scale have been preserved for over three centuries. The more Chatham has changed the more its people have tried to retain their links to the past and to their unique surroundings. In great measure, they have been successful so that Chatham remains today as a very special place.

The Comprehensive Plan is an effort to maintain and build on that continuity so as to hold onto the best of what we have, while simultaneously dealing with the pressures and problems of a rapidly changing world. Ensuring the survival of the things that we value in Chatham can not be left to chance.

