

Working Waterfronts Initiative

Summary Report for the Town of Bowers Beach

September 2013

written and submitted by
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Preface

Numerous commercial fishing and water-dependent business activities occur along Delaware's tidal coastline of approximately 381 miles. From Claymont to Fenwick Island, these "working waterfronts" contribute to the State's economic vitality and quality of life and are important to maintaining Delaware's coastal heritage. Unfortunately, many of these working waterfronts have experienced significant decline due to the loss of commercial fishing and processing industries over the last several decades. In addition, the collapse of some recreational fisheries and other water-dependent businesses has caused economic malaise in areas that once supported a robust economy. Also, as populations shift to coastal areas, new growth and development pressures (tourism, residential housing, condos, etc.) are being exerted on communities with working waterfronts. In addition, tourism and recreation are increasingly taking over for other traditional uses of the ocean, such as fisheries, boat building, and marine transportation. Whether a community views these possible changes as opportunities or threats is critical, since each type of economic development could represent a conflict with some types of water-related businesses. These issues can be especially acute for rural coastal economies.

This accordingly, emphasizes the need for sustainable development of working waterfronts. The tenets of sustainable development support an environment in which economic growth and environmental protection are viewed as mutually compatible activities and not conflicting ones. This in turn requires that various human activities must be integrated within a coherent setting of land-use planning policies, addressing problems of environmental carrying capacity. They also should be planned and developed within the limits of the local socioeconomic and natural carrying capacities.

To determine what the current status and needs are for Delaware's traditional maritime communities, the University of Delaware's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative is coordinating the *Working Waterfronts Initiative*. The objectives of the program are:

- Assess the prevailing socioeconomic conditions of Delaware's working waterfronts; this includes provision of a baseline study and characterizing the existing state of these communities, which will assist in identifying the main areas of concern.
- Analyze the impacts of the prevailing environmental conditions on the socioeconomic structure of the study sites.
- Identify business infrastructure needs
- Develop a set of guidelines and/or recommendations for establishing viable waterfront communities

Acknowledgements

The UD/Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative appreciates and acknowledges our project partners, the municipal officials in Bowers Beach, and community stakeholders for their assistance and contributions to this public service project. We believe that the information collected and analyzed in this report will provide stakeholders with a more complete understanding of their collective challenges to sustain and enhance the working waterfront. We hope our suggested development and community engagement strategies will help the Town of Bowers Beach grow its commercial, water-dependent businesses while preserving the many characteristics that make it a unique, maritime community rich with history, culture and opportunity.

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Executive Summary

In 2012, the University of Delaware's Sustainable Coastal Communities Initiative launched its *Working Waterfronts Initiative* to develop sustainability strategies for preserving and maintaining the state's traditional maritime communities. The bayside municipality of Bowers Beach was identified and selected as a pilot community for the initial study. During late-winter/early-spring of 2013, numerous community members were interviewed by a UD contractor to obtain their feedback concerning the current status and trends in Bowers Beach. Their responses were used to create a qualitative characterization concerning the current economic conditions in the community, the potential for economic development and growth, the needs for quality of life improvements, and actions that could be taken to address these issues. This summary report represents the findings of this study and will be used to inform the stakeholders in Bowers Beach and the state's resource managers about the potential for creating a sustainable working waterfront.

Background

Issue Statement

The economy of Bowers Beach, a traditional maritime community, has been in decline since the 1980's due to the collapse of local recreational fisheries and decreases in valuable commercial fish stocks. As a result, the local real estate market assumed a more prominent role as an economic driver as Bowers Beach remained an attractive locale for retirees and others seeking a comfortable quality of life in a quaint, bayside community. However, the downturn in the real estate market within the past decade has left Bowers Beach with significant challenges to support continued economic growth while maintaining its rich cultural heritage and tradition as one of Delaware's premier working waterfronts.

Project Scope of Work

The purpose of this study is to survey community and business responses regarding different forms of development activity (tourism, residential housing, condos, etc.) that have been discussed and/or proposed in and near working waterfronts and identify possible resource management issues. This will help the investigators to assess socioeconomic impacts and identify main areas of concern in order to develop a conceptual framework for sustainable development, including identifying future business infrastructure needs that might enhance profitability.

Methodology

The goal of the method was to synthesize and focus the discussion of community needs among respondents. This allows for the development of a conceptual framework for use in strategic planning purposes. The intent is to take input that has been previously only conversational and anecdotal and transform it into more qualitative data.

A total of 16 respondents were contacted utilizing a semi-structured interview technique. The respondent pool was comprised of a diverse group of community members representing municipal leaders, community activists, safety officials, business owners, commercial and recreational fishermen, residents and non-residents.

Respondents were initially chosen based on the researcher's knowledge of the town and its issues. Additional respondents were identified as part of the interviews allowing the researcher to recognize key people and seek a diverse group of opinions. Every attempt was made to obtain an array of opinions on each issue as it arose.

The interview questionnaire was based on a framework of themes identified in meetings with municipal and business leaders and through a review of planning documents and other related background materials. The interview process was first initiated with community leaders and then expanded to include others as they were identified. This is commonly referred to as a "snow ball" approach.

The interview process and questionnaire are meant to be adaptable to allow for subsequent questions to be appropriately modified as a result of individual responses. This allows the researcher to tailor the interview to the specific knowledge of the respondent and more thoroughly explore the theme and associated sub-components as they are discovered.

The semi-structured interview technique is common in the social sciences and particularly, within cultural anthropological research (Salant and Dillman 1994). This method was chosen because it allows for the open flow of ideas and exchange of opinion. Specifically, it allows the researcher to identify common issues and themes among respondents as well as areas of conflict (Bernard 1994).

All respondent identities and responses have been kept confidential in accordance with University of Delaware human subject research policy.

Community Profile

Cultural Heritage

Historically, Bowers Beach is commonly referred to as a fishing village and has a well-earned reputation as the “quintessential” waterfront community (Brenner 2012, Hannah 1997). For visitors and residents alike, this rich maritime heritage is what gives Bowers its allure.

Water-related tourism has been a part of the culture of Bowers Beach dating back to the late-1800's and early-1900's in the days of the Steamboat Frederica. This vessel would bring tourists from the Philadelphia area to Bowers Beach, where they would recreate on the beach while the boat loaded cargo such as produce and oysters. Geographically, Bowers offers one of the first, nice, sandy beach destinations south of Wilmington and southeastern Pennsylvania.

Commercial fishing has been part of the maritime culture of Bowers for at least a century and a half. The commercial oyster industry thrived until the 1960's and the king crab (horseshoe crab) fishery was robust into the 1930's.

The 1970's and early-1980's saw the weakfish boom. Bowers was a premier destination for recreational anglers seeking the popular Delaware State Fish. The town parking lots would be full of cars from people going out on one of the numerous head boats ported in the commercial harbor on the Murderkill River. The parking lot was also full of vehicles and boat trailers associated with the private boats of recreational anglers utilizing the public boat launches on the Murderkill River.

More recently, Bowers experienced the retirement and housing boom of the late-1990's and early-2000's that was experienced by most coastal areas. The proximity to water, the sandy beach and maritime heritage being primary factors as exhibited by similarly situated coastal towns.

Project Findings

Community Issues

Like many other towns, Bowers Beach is in transition dealing with the post-housing bubble and the associated influx of retirees. The artificial inflation of housing prices has priced many in the lower middle class and some locals out (these were the people that were originally attracted to Bowers). As has been observed in other towns, this has caused a rift between the new arrivals and the more established "local" residents.

The research discovered four distinct, self-identified social groups in the community. These can be generalized as: ¹commercial watermen, ²retirees (Pennsylvania Avenue), the ³fire company and ⁴locals. There is some mixing of individuals across these social groups. Interestingly, the installation of a bocce ball court has been a community focal point providing a degree of cohesion among residents.

A strong association to the maritime heritage/culture of Bowers is exhibited by all sectors of the community. Everyone indicates the need or desire to preserve and enhance the maritime culture to some degree. Similarly, everyone realizes that change is inevitable but it needs to occur within the context of the maritime culture/ fishing village.

Those people that have recently moved into Bowers indicated that they were looking for the beach/waterfront feature without the resort atmosphere of Lewes/Rehoboth or Bethany/Fenwick areas. The one downside is that Bowers lacks amenities for year-round residents.

"We knew we wanted to retire to the beach. Bowers offered us waterfront living and beach without the resort atmosphere. We fell in love with the maritime heritage and culture."

- Year Round Residents, retired

The most commonly expressed desired convenience is a general store/gas station. Several general stores have, in recent years, attempted to establish themselves in Bowers but have not been able to survive the winter. Bowers has approximately 175 year round residents.

"You have to travel a long way to get a gallon of milk or a gallon of gas around here."

- Year Round Resident

Although the community has some degree of divide between sectors, a recurring theme across all social groups is that there is a need to work together if Bowers is to thrive as a community. There is also recognized need that the community must prove to state and federal agencies that Bowers is viable and economically sustainable for purposes of obtaining funding for infrastructure and economic development projects. There is strong evidence that this discussion has been ongoing in the community for some time.

"We need to make sure that the regulatory and funding agencies recognize that Bowers matters."

- Public Official

"The people of the town need to work together to make Bowers a better place."

- Commercial waterman

Bowers is dealing with drastically depressed tourism relative to the Steamboat Frederica (turn of the century) and weakfish boom (1970's and 1980's). The decline in fishing tourism started to occur in early to mid-1990's and is attributed to the decline in weakfish populations and subsequent overregulation.

"Our family left town when the weakfish started to decline."

- Former Business Owner

A strong distrust in state government, specifically DNREC, is present in each sector of the community. The perceived overregulation of fishing, the recent lack of dredging of the Murderkill River, and the ineffectiveness of beach replenishment are all noted as cause for this distrust.

DNREC is seen as inconsistent and uncoordinated between departments and divisions, which exacerbates this perceived ineffectiveness. Several respondents were interested to see if the Bayshore Initiative could serve to better coordinate DNREC's activities related to the Bayshore towns.

"DNREC changes the rules so often we cannot keep track of what is going on making it hard to run a business from year to year."

- Commercial waterman

Business Infrastructure Needs

Murderkill River

The Murderkill River is viewed as a significant part of the community business infrastructure and is an important conduit to water-dependent commerce. The shoaling in the mouth of river is viewed as an impediment to this vital commerce.

"The river is like a road, vital to commerce, the lifeblood of this community."

- Business owner

In years past, the river had been dredged with some regularity (every other year). Recent state fiscal austerity has resulted in this activity not occurring.

Head boats and other commercial fishing boats running aground in the mouth of the river is viewed as tantamount to vehicles unable to use roads. It is believed that DNREC and the Army Corp of Engineers have the responsibility to keep the river navigable, just like the Delaware Department of Transportation has to keep roads passable.

The navigability of the river is also viewed as a public safety issue for boats and other water-related activity user groups that may need emergency assistance.

Beach

Beach replenishment is seen by many respondents as a necessary expense for a short term solution. The last replenishment is widely considered to have been ineffective as it was washed out in one weekend by a northeast storm.

Several respondents indicated that the sand bags that stabilize the north side of the channel and beach should be extended out further and higher. It was suggested by several that the dredging of the river and sand bag projects could be combined so that the dredge spoils could be used in the sand bags.

"We understand that the state is tight on funds. It would make sense that these projects occur simultaneously as a way to save cost."

- Year Round Resident

Parking Lot

The town landscape is dominated by the state-owned parking lot that services the public boat launch areas on the Murderkill River. For many visitors, this parking lot is the gateway to the Bowers community.

It was suggested repeatedly that this "gateway" concept could be leveraged by putting a visitor center, bathrooms and an outfitter/bait and tackle shop on the parking lot. Given the seasonality of this type of business, and the lack of success of the general stores in town, this may be better supported/profitable as a state owned building with a leased concession.

"The parking lot is the first place visitors stop in town. We need to use this opportunity to make sure they get the information and services they are looking for."

- Business owner

The need for a tackle shop was identified because people coming in with private boats no longer have a place to buy bait and tackle. In the past, several of the docks sold bait and tackle. Now, bait and tackle are only available on the head boats for paying customers.

This "outfitter" concession could also offer kayak and bird watching items for the anticipated influx of eco-tourism related business associated with the Bayshore Initiative.

It was also suggested that part of the parking lot be converted to green space. This would provide a multi-use area and could also address issues with stormwater runoff discharged to the Murderkill River.

The green space could then be used to develop a seafood market concept similar to the popular farmers' markets that have been successful in many other small communities throughout the state. Outdoor carnivals and music festivals were also suggested in addition to the already established Super Thursday event.

Flooding

Storm related flooding on Hubbard Avenue is an issue for local businesses and traffic heading to the parking lot. The south end of Hubbard dead-ends at the Murderkill River. It is not bullheaded. A flapper valve has been installed to handle flooding but it gets regularly clogged by mud.

The mud and flood waters routinely put a large area under many inches of water making the road impassible.

A need was also identified for *Phragmites* control in the wetlands that border the town as a method to improve wetland function and reduce flooding.

Low Impact/Eco-tourism

The concept of increasing tourism is generally accepted. There is an interest in returning to the days of the "full parking lot". Increasing low-impact tourism is of interest to many, given the unlikely event of the weakfish fishery rebounding to historic levels.

Several low impact/ecotourism projects were identified. These include:

- Kayak launch
- Kayak trail
- Bike trail
- Pontoon tours
- Lighthouse tours
- Sunset cruises
- Dolphin cruises

With the likely increase in eco-tourism associated with the Bayshore Initiative, there is an opportunity for the local watermen to adapt and diversify by offering services in addition to fishing.

"The watermen need to diversify or they will be a victim of their own paradigm."

- Year Round Resident

"Watermen have started to diversify because they cannot make a full time living fishing with the current regulations."

- Commercial Waterman

The general consensus was that these new forms of non-consumptive tourism needed to coexist with, and not replace, the traditional consumptive uses already occurring.

"Ecotourism is coming. We need to embrace it while making sure that it does not replace the established traditional consumptive uses."

- Business Owner

Potential conflicts with ecotourism

The discussion of eco-tourism also identified some potential conflicts with established uses. There may be some navigational safety issues for kayaks on the Murderkill in the commercial harbor area, especially during the high-traffic crabbing season. Further west on the Murderkill, there could be negative interactions between kayakers and hunters during the waterfowl seasons in the fall.

"We may not want to promote kayaking in areas where active hunting is occurring and in the commercial area of the river."

- *Public Safety Official*

It is also feared that bird watchers may have an adverse reaction to the commercial harvesting of horseshoe crabs. Several local watermen have a permit for this activity, as it is an important supplemental form of income. Watermen often hold permits for multiple species because some species such as striped bass have a limited daily/seasonal allocation that does not yield enough income to be considered full-time pay.

It was generally submitted that the St. Jones River would be better for kayaking. Two access issues with the St. Jones were identified. One is that a road would likely be needed across a marshy area. This would require state and federal permitting. The other issue is that some of the land owners on the river may not want increased boat and foot traffic.

General Business Needs

New business opportunities are considered to be sparse in Bowers. There had been hotels in town in the past but none exist presently. There could be an opportunity for a bed and breakfast.

Another concept that was submitted was to rezone the lots adjacent to the north side of the parking lot. This could then be designated as a commercial district to attract new businesses.

Suggested Path Forward

There is ample evidence that many in the community want to address the issues facing the community as described in this report. Many are willing to work together for a common cause. There is obvious positive momentum in the community that can be leveraged.

The prevailing attitude is that the maritime heritage and fishing village culture of the community should be preserved and enhanced. Any infrastructure improvements should occur within the context of this preservation and enhancement.

It is interesting to note that Bowers limiting factors, specifically geography and demographics, are at the same time its biggest assets. It is a small town at the end of a dead-end road. These two features do not allow for amenities and associated build up that has occurred in beach/resort towns to the south.

It is in this way that Bowers is unique. That which draws people to retire, live and recreate in Bowers are the same reasons that the beach town phenomenon experienced in Lewes, Rehoboth and Bethany cannot happen in Bowers.

This should be recognized and embraced in the community planning process. This will allow for the town's heritage to be preserved and will serve as a useful guiding principle in any potential enhancements.

To address the challenges facing Bowers, it is essential for stakeholders to begin functioning as an interested and engaged community. The stakeholders need to find new ways of thinking and acting together. Strategic thinking and the capacity to translate ideas into action will be critical to achieving success. The University suggests collaborating with a Bowers Beach stakeholder group in a "Strategic Doing" process. The basis of this process will be four key questions:

1. What could we do together?
2. What should we do together?
3. What will we do together?
4. When will we get back together?

UD staff will assist with organizing and hosting meetings, facilitating and guiding purposeful conversations, and developing effective strategies that translate ideas into action. The "Strategic Doing" process will balance both open participation and leadership direction. It will also help the stakeholder group to identify and keep focused on the transformational questions that will move their community towards implementation and execution of sustainability approaches and practices.

Potential Funding Sources

Flooding

The Hubbard Avenue flooding problem is likely eligible for Surface Water Discharge Planning Grant available from DNREC Division of Water. This grant would help subsidize the creation of a planning document. The Request for Proposals is due each February. Contact – Jim Sullivan, DNREC 302-739-9946

Parking Lot

The parking lot is owned by the state Division of Fish and Wildlife as part of the Federal Aid program. The state could use fishing license revenues and associated matching funds to add amenities such as restrooms and concessions to this area. These project ideas would need to be submitted to consideration to the Federal Aid Coordinator, Shelly DiBon at 302-739-9911.

The Delaware Land & Water Conservation Trust Fund might also be a possible source of financial support for any capital projects associated with repurposing of the parking lot. Bob Ehemann with the Division of Parks & Recreation is the contact at Robert.Ehemann@state.de.us or telephone at 302 739-9235.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism will likely play a significant role in the advancement of low-impact tourism opportunities for Bowers Beach. The Kent County Tourism Office is a possible source for assistance; contact Cindy Small, Executive Director at 800-233-5368.

Heather Kenton, Tourism Development Leader with the **Delaware** Economic Development Office (DEDO), is also a valuable source of information concerning ecotourism support services and can be contacted at Heather.Kenton@state.de.us or 302-672-6804.

Transportation

Improved road signage has been identified as a community need. Lori Huston, DelDOT's Traffic Sign Shop Supervisor, can be reached at (302) 760-2581.

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Appendix A

Working Waterfronts Initiative

Delaware Sea Grant College Program

Bowers Beach Pilot Project

Semi-structured Interview Questions/Themes

- Describe your family/civic/business association with the waterfront in Bowers
- Describe what Bowers waterfront looked like "x" years ago (specific to their association)
- Describe the present day waterfront
- How has it changed and for what reasons?
- How could it be revitalized/is there are need?
- What could make it happen/and/or what are impediments?
- What access/business infrastructure needs/improvements are needed?
- If funding were to become available, how could it best be spent?
- Please identify other key people to be interviewed (and for community networking/mapping)