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Historic Island Community Protects its Working Waterfront

The Town of Isle au Haut, an island community located 5 miles due south of Stonington, has received a final award of \$150,000 from the State of Maine Working Waterfront Access Pilot Program (WWAPP) in exchange for placing its municipal pier and landing under permanent restriction for use as a commercial fisheries access point for local lobstermen.

Steve Shaffer, former Second Selectman and liaison for the project, stressed the importance of maintaining the municipal pier for the benefit of fishermen and for island transport and commerce with the mainland.

“More than half of our community’s 40 year-round residents rely on lobstering for the majority of their income,” said Shaffer. “The pier and property is a lifeline. The award from the Working Waterfront Access Pilot Program will help us afford the construction of a larger pier that will enhance its utility to fishermen and to the townspeople. At the same time, the property will be accessible forever by commercial fishermen according to the terms of the restrictive covenant.”

Shaffer expressed appreciation to the Department of Marine Resources and to the Land for Maine’s Future Program, which jointly administer the WWAPP, for support of this project. He also acknowledged the assistance from Coastal Enterprises Inc., which was instrumental in helping the town apply for the funds and make its way through the program requirements.

Governor Baldacci described the WWAPP by saying, “This program is another way to make critical investments in the future well-being of Maine families and the health of our coastal communities. Working Waterfronts define the character of Maine’s coast for residents and visitors alike, and are critical to our economy and heritage.”

WWAPP money, combined with about \$500,000 in grants from the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, the Maine Department of Transportation’s Small Harbor Improvement Program and matched with Town funds, enabled a contract with Prock

Marine for the replacement of Isle au Haut's 50-year-old pier with a new structure that is 60 percent larger and will have a new mechanical hoist and ramp for accessing the Town-owned floats. The dock is used by all the year-round residents. It is the sole commercial access to the island and the only place that the Isle au Haut Boat Company, the primary ferry service, has public access year round. Every business on the island relies on the pier to ship products or receive items that they have ordered. An island services boat, Sunbeam, ties up for Telemed appointments with the Town doctor and offers church service for the island residents. A larger ferry also uses the concrete launch ramp to the side of the pier to offload vital supplies and construction materials often brought by heavy trucks. Construction of the new pier has begun and is expected to be completed by the end of November.

Commissioner of the Department of Marine Resources, George Lapointe pointed out that island communities are especially fragile and subject to development pressures that can displace year round communities dependent on the sea for their livelihoods.

Commissioner Lapointe said, "Understanding that there are relatively few employment alternatives available, securing permanent fishing access on islands has particular urgency. Maine has a strong interest in maintaining strong and vital offshore island communities. Through this investment, we hope that fishing will be as much a part of Isle au Haut's future as it has been their past."

Since the earliest permanent settlements on Isle au Haut were recorded, beginning in the late 18th century, the islanders have been fishermen. Cod, herring, and lobsters found their way to off island markets. The slow increase of a large seasonal population brought in part by the allure of the Acadia National Park lands on the island, has introduced a more diversified focus to the economy. At the same time the island's commercial fishing access points and traditional fishing grounds have shrunk, partly as a result of pressures on the land caused by seasonal residential development. With the help of the Working Waterfront Access Pilot Program award and restrictive covenant, the islanders will permanently protect their most important fishing access property and bolster the sector most tied to the island's heritage, the commercial fisheries.

As detailed in studies by Coastal Enterprises Inc. and the Island Institute, the disappearance of important commercial fishing access properties along the entire coast threatens fishermen's livelihoods and the cohesiveness of Maine's seafaring communities. Estimates of the amount of remaining shorefront serving as working waterfront access place the total at no more than 20 linear miles in a coastal length of more than 5,300 miles, or less than one half of one percent. By 2050, the Maine State Planning Office predicts that much of the State's coastline will be classified as suburban/urban putting the remaining commercial fishing access properties at risk. With the covenant now in place, Isle au Haut's principle access point with its 0.7 acres of land, more than 200 feet of rocky shoreline, and a new 3,900 square-foot wharf, is now secure.

Although the Working Waterfront Access Pilot Program has committed to protect a total of 19 commercial fishing properties from Lubec to York, the future of the program rests on passage of a new bond for the Land for Maine's Future Program which includes funds for working waterfront protection. The Natural Resource bond referendum question totaling \$10 million (\$2 million dedicated to the WWAPP program) will be decided by Maine voters at the ballot box in November, 2010. Increasing interest in the program from working waterfront property owners supports estimates that there are approximately 100 commercial fishing properties in the state

that remain unprotected and are critically important to much of coastal Maine's reliance on fishing for economic prosperity.

For additional information on the Working Waterfront Access Pilot Program visit the website, www.wwapp.org