

RABBLE-ROUSERS

Islands Coalition organizes to make a difference

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Maine islanders have much in common. They share isolation and the high costs it imposes, on everything from health care to energy; their schools tend to be much smaller and more costly to operate than schools on the mainland; and affordable housing remains an issue. On a daily basis, the experiences of islanders are different from those of people who live in the rest of Maine—or for that matter, the rest of the United States.

Of course, no one's forcing anyone into an island life. Most adults living in year-round island communities are there because they want to be, sacrifices and all. And at the risk of characterizing islanders as a group (something mainlanders must avoid), it's fair to say they're a pretty independent lot, not given to collaborating with outsiders, or even residents of other islands.

So when islanders join a coalition to address problems common to islands all along the Maine coast, it's news.

"The strength of islanders, like fishermen, is their independence," observes Roger Berle, a longtime Cliff Island resident and landowner who became the first chairman of a new organization, the Islands Coalition, in 2004. Since then the coalition has taken on schools, affordable housing, secession, health care and taxation—each a complex topic in itself, each with different meanings on different islands. Along with his co-chair, Marge Stratton of Vinalhaven, and a staff person from the Island Institute, Berle has steered this fledgling coalition through crisis and calm, laying the groundwork for islanders to speak up as a group at the legislature, the Portland City Council, or any other forum appropriate to the matter at hand.

The coalition meets quarterly in Rockland, and almost from the start, in an effort to make meetings more than "gripe sessions" (Berle's phrase), it has invited experts to address members on a particular topic. In February 2007 the subject was island schools and what could happen to them if Gov. John Baldacci's statewide school consolidation plan, proposed in December 2006, went into effect. Panelists included a representative of the Maine Municipal Association, a school principal, a school superintendent, an expert on school governance and two legislators.

"We want as many legislators as possible to come," says Berle. "Some have been incredibly faithful. Without the legislators there, we'd have been whistling in the dark."

And avoiding that possibility is critical. Historically, mainland bodies (mindful of islanders' independent-minded reputation) have shown skepticism that the people purporting to represent islands indeed spoke for their residents.

"We needed each community [to come together and] speak with one voice," says Berle, who recalls spending considerable time at early coalition meetings designing a structure so all islands would have elected representatives. The idea was to create an organization that actually represented year-round islanders' views, in hopes it would be taken seriously by legislators, regulators and others. Berle thinks it worked: "Right away," he says, "it had a better, more substantial feel" than earlier attempts to organize.

Berle gives a lot of credit to Nate Michaud, the former Island Institute staff member who first undertook organizational chores for what would become the coalition in March 2004. Following Michaud

was Dana Leath, a one-time Island Institute Fellow who helped set up meetings and establish ground rules for the group. An early controversy: Should Little Diamond Island, which has no year-round community but a highly organized group of seasonal residents, be included? "We had a harangue over that one," Berle recalls. In the end Little Diamond joined but didn't get a vote; today, both Little and Great Diamond are full members. Other islands in the coalition include Vinalhaven, North Haven, Great Cranberry, Islesford, Islesboro, Swan's, Isle au Haut, Chebeague, Long, Monhegan and Peaks. Most are self-governing; a handful are part of Portland. Long Island seceded from Portland a decade ago; Peaks is attempting to do the same thing this year. Chebeague seceded from Cumberland last year.

Like the ground rules for eligibility and electing members, it was important to define the coalition's relationship to the Island Institute. "We had a sense from a number of the islands," Berle says carefully, "[that] there wasn't a wholehearted embracing of the Institute. We wanted to be a separate entity." Still, the Institute continues to provide staff assistance, which is important to the functioning of the coalition as it proceeds to represent islanders on a variety of fronts.

"The Island Institute is a member of the coalition," explains an equally diplomatic Chris Wolff, the staff member currently charged with managing the relationship.

Schools rose to the top of the priority list at the start of 2007 because of the governor's announced plan to consolidate districts. Previously the coalition put considerable emphasis on affordable housing: Members helped organize a well-attended conference on the topic in 2005, and the coalition has since participated in a coast-wide group focusing on housing. Community housing trusts and a local-option real estate transfer tax are among the tools the coalition would like to see used to deal with the housing problem. This issue is unlikely to disappear from the coalition's agenda in the future.

Secession is another preoccupation. Last year the coalition took a position in favor of Chebeague's effort to break away from Cumberland. At a meeting in early 2007 it voted 6-1 (with one abstention) to support Peaks Island's attempt to leave Portland. Peaks's secession effort has been clouded by division on the island, and after the meeting it was unclear how far the coalition would be willing to push the matter.

A third major concern is island health care, including services for the elderly. Islesboro, Chebeague, Peaks and Vinalhaven, all coalition members, have exchanged information, Berle says, and hope that together, they can exert greater leverage when it comes to legislation, regulations or grant funding than they could as individual communities.

Taxation, solid waste, fire protection, insurance, protecting working waterfronts and restoring fisheries have all been on coalition agendas in the past and are likely to remain so in the coming years.

"The trick will be maintaining our momentum," Berle declares. "Having the same representatives [from year to year] gives us continuity and consistency. If every year we can be rabble-rousers on some significant issue, we will have succeeded."

David D. Platt is editor of Island Journal.