



Maine Association of
Conservation Commissions

Bar Harbor's Dark Skies Ordinance

Bar Harbor, Maine

Home Rules, Home Tools: Locally Led Conservation Achievements

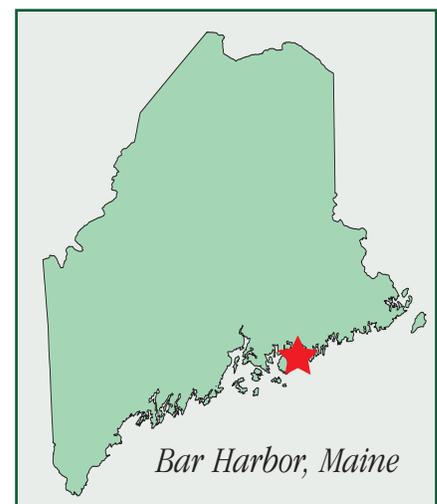
Bar Harbor is a gateway community that hosts some 3 million visitors each year who come to enjoy the natural beauty of Acadia National Park. As a consequence, there is a great deal of development pressure in Bar Harbor itself and throughout Mt. Desert Island. It is a major challenge to manage this growth to protect the very qualities of place that attract so many visitors and make the area such a wonderful place to live. Clean water, open space, small-scale development and its starry dark skies are just a few of those qualities.

On the Island, as in most of rural Maine, residents are still fortunate to be able to witness starry skies, meteor showers and the Northern Lights. However, two-thirds of Americans can no longer see the stars due to light pollution. Commercial, residential and streetlights that direct light towards places where it is not needed and at higher levels than needed create light pollution and make the starry sky disappear. At the same time these poorly designed lights waste energy and money.

According to the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA), light pollution has negative effects on animals as well as humans. Migrating animals can be confused by light pollution. (There have been reports of flocks of birds flying in circles around brightly lit cities until exhaustion and disorientation take their toll.) And even relatively small amounts of light pollution can interfere with the mating patterns of fireflies, which communicate Morse-Code-style with flashes in the dark. Humans are susceptible to negative effects as well. Not fulfilling your daily darkness quota may throw off hormone levels.



In 2007 the Bar Harbor Conservation Commission hosted its biennial regional Conservation Summit. Over 20 conservation groups from the area participated. Participating organizations included area conservation commissions, Acadia National Park, College of the Atlantic, Maine Coast Heritage Trust and many others. The intent of this biennial summit is to develop plans to collaborate with surrounding towns on a significant conservation project. Since nature knows no borders, the Commission believes it is important that area groups work together to protect our region's unique natural environment.



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At the 2007 summit, the conservation partners decided to move forward with efforts to protect the night skies. The Bar Harbor Conservation Commission took on the task of writing a Dark Sky Ordinance, as directed by the Bar Harbor Comprehensive Plan. The Commission had worked closely with the town planner to develop that plan, so it was also eager to help implement it. Several of the surrounding towns already had restrictions on outdoor lighting and others were considering ordinances, so this was a regional effort.

The Commission worked with Peter Lord, the director of the Island Astronomy Institute to write a draft Dark Sky Ordinance. The new rules would require that all new construction projects install lights brighter than a traditional incandescent 100-watt bulb to have shields that direct the light they emit downward, where it is needed, not up into the sky.

Throughout this process, Commission members met with the planner, the Planning Board and Town Council to fine-tune the ordinance language. For example, when first proposed, some businesses were concerned that it would be prohibitively expensive to replace existing lights. The Commission worked to respond to the concerns of local businesses. Commission members also wrote letters and articles in area newspapers to educate the public about dark sky compliant lighting fixtures, which are no more expensive than traditional fixtures and are more energy and cost effective. Other concerns were raised over the course of this process, each of which the Commission addressed in ways that resulted in public support.

Finally, after the draft ordinance was approved by the Bar Harbor Planning Board and Town Council, it was put to a town referendum vote. In November 2009, residents voted 2,270 to 568 in favor of "An amendment to add new lighting requirements for new development projects that incorporate dark sky lighting standards." [All new ordinances in Bar Harbor must be approved by referendum.]



In October that year, Acadia National Park held a week end long "Night Sky Festival" with events and workshops related to star gazing and astronomy. The Chamber of Commerce, Island Astronomy Institute and The Conservation Commission participated in the festival, which generated nationwide publicity. Throngs of people participated in the event, making a great success both as an area attraction and as an opportunity to educate the public about the issue. The Night Sky Festival has now become an annual event and area motels and hotels routinely advertise "dark skies" as one of their unique attractions.

As is the case with all such efforts, the Commission's success in promoting this ordinance was a product of more than just having a good idea. It was, in equal measure, also the result of careful planning, collaborative relationships with key stakeholder groups, and paying respectful attention to the concerns of the people most directly impacted by the initiative.

According to BHCC chair Jill Weber, "I believe a number of factors contributed to the overwhelming approval the ordinance received from town voters. First, we were involved in creating the town's Comprehensive Plan and

were able to embed the dark skies concept in the that plan, giving us a reference point for the ordinance initiative. We also had Commission members willing to contribute hours of work to the project, and a town planner who is very supportive of the Commission and willing to work on its behalf. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we have an excellent relationship with our Planning Board and Town Council. They respect our work and take seriously any proposals we bring to them."

Other towns on Mt. Desert Island and around Frenchman's Bay have adopted similar ordinances, all with the intent of keeping that region of Maine free of light pollution. This initiative is an excellent example of how good conservation planning and regulation can have a positive economic impact.

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