

A Vision ~ Damariscotta in 2025

Introduction

The key starting point in putting together a town's Comprehensive Plan is to "paint" a picture of what we hope and expect our community to be ten years down the road – how it will look, what improvements have been made and what safeguards have been instituted to preserve that vision well into the future. The goals and policies emanating from The Vision will be the means by which Damariscotta, and in our case as the service center for Lincoln County, the larger community of townships comprising it, will maintain its grasp on and realize this vision.

Being the energized sort of place it is, Damariscotta has not been idle regarding its approach to the future. In recent years, a number of purposeful community-wide exercises have been held to document the townspeople's feelings about and hopes for what they want their town to be like as it moves forward. For the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee, the work accomplished in the course of those exercises has been providential, giving the committee a valuable jump-start in its process.

While most of the findings come as no surprise, what was emphatically put in bold letters is that our small town of Damariscotta, a true nugget of peace, calm, civility, cultural activity and natural beauty, should never be taken for granted. Great emphasis was put on the word "local," in whatever context it appeared, meaning not merely being faithful to the community by shopping locally, but by thinking locally and perhaps most important, by being local.

"Being local" – a far reach from "small mindedness" – is the mindset that is the glue to keep such a community as Damariscotta whole and intact, its character true. It encompasses an ideal to be striven for, where people can live and work in their town; where there is broad community involvement with schools, organizations and events; where goods and services are readily obtainable; and where interaction with and participation in the local government keeps the populace informed and gives them a voice.

A Vision ~ Damariscotta in 2025

From its earliest days, Damariscotta and its history have been the product of the river it sits on – a highway for travel and commerce, an abundant source of fish and shellfish, the logical site for manufactories using local resources and ship building . . . and therefore the place where people chose to live along its shores at its farthest inland reach. There, Damariscotta became a town. Even though its maritime heyday of wooden ship building ended generations ago, that history is embedded as an essential part of its character, in part because it is a colorful history but also because many of the family names associated with it are still here in the community.

People, of course, are what make up a community, and what make it work. The broader Damariscotta community (which, it must be said, includes many people from surrounding townships who consider Damariscotta their town) has a population remarkable in its wealth of wide-ranging skills, talents and backgrounds. They are the town's greatest asset. Such people not only continue to form the strong cadre of business owners, institutional directors and organizers of events, they are remarkable as well for their enthusiasm, energy and high rate of volunteerism on all fronts. While many are past the usual age of retirement, it is the love of place that keeps Damariscotta the especially friendly and active place it is known for being, where, coupled with its open-minded and responsive town government, fresh and innovative thinking are regularly brought into play in addressing town issues and making decisions.

Proximity to the river having long been the criterion for building and development in our rather constrained geographic space, the town and its Main Street have remained compact with intimately situated businesses and structures. This has always and continues to foster the sense of the closely connected community people enjoy here. The effect is the same, getting away from Main Street and into the quieter neighborhoods, but gradually becomes more rural as the walking distances become greater. Recognizing this appeal of closeness for many, the town has capitalized on it through thoughtfully managed but deliberately incremental growth, the idea being to make Damariscotta an improved version of its old self, not bigger.

Considering it is 12 miles from the sea, the waterfront has stayed active as ever with both recreational and commercial boats making daily use of the town landing and launch ramp. Despite the limiting factors of the need for ever more parking space and of space itself, the town has managed through clever resolve to enhance and enlarge the river front park at the water's edge as a dual benefit of shoring up the edge of the municipal parking lot against expected future storm surges. It has become a welcome, attractive and all-important year-round gathering place for leisurely visitors as well as for major events. With the same "Let's get it done" mindset, a solution for how to better accommodate marine interests has been realized by moving their vehicles and trailers onto a piling-supported wharf, designated "For Marine Interests Only," over Misery Gulch, thereby availing a good number more parking spaces to the general public and more floating dock space alongside the wharf.

Downtown remains the social and cultural heart of Damariscotta, relatively unchanged with its old brick buildings made of Damariscotta River bricks, its tight and intimate Main Street brightened with flower boxes, its friendly stores and restaurants, theater, library, post office, professional offices, gas station and close-by neighborhoods, all within easy walking distance. There is a wholesome self-sufficiency to the town that makes it, undeniably, the welcoming "front parlor" for the entire region extending out to the Pemaquid and Boothbay peninsulas. While improvements and renovations to the older buildings are a regular part of maintaining Damariscotta's architectural character, new construction in the downtown business district is much deliberated over and only gradual.

But as happens elsewhere with growth, Main Street has seen a linear extension northward along Business Route 1. To stanch the all too common tendency for such an extension to become a typically unattractive "business strip" of uncoordinated development, great effort and study has gone into remedying this trend with rewarding success. Turning lanes and bike lanes have served to tame and slow down traffic. Buildings with unfortunate facades and ill-used frontage have seen fit to renovate in compliance with Damariscotta's prescription for what's suitable along the Route 1B corridor, which prefers to see large parking lots located to the side and rear of buildings while additions, perhaps with multiple occupancy, are extended closer to the street, all combined with landscaping and resting places for pedestrians and bicyclists using the new sidewalks and bike lanes. The effect, overall, has been to arrest unguided growth and expansion, replacing it with a measure of the safe closeness and intimacy that has long characterized Damariscotta and kept it beautiful.

Something similar is happening with housing in town, especially within the village where space and property limitations necessitate mostly modest construction projects, remodeling and creating apartments in some of the larger homes. The idea again is to make things better, not necessarily bigger, and much of the thinking has to do with our aging population and its preference to live within walking distance of the village if possible. Where it's not, housing that suits their particular needs is becoming more commonplace along with those services that allow older people to get about and still remain in their homes. This is an important trend and speaks a lot to the quality of life expected here. As for housing in general, with a population not expected to increase much in the next decade, renovation and energy efficiency are often taking the place of actual new home building, though some multi-family housing is making more sense closer to town.

The matrix within which we live and work, our environment, is every bit as important as all the above considerations, and then some. It frames our lives and in most cases is a major factor in why we choose to live here in the first place. Protecting it from being adversely affected by our own activities, as well as safeguarding the resources it offers us from overharvesting and simple disregard, remains foremost in our minds. Not quite 15 square miles, the treasure includes lakes and ponds, forest and field, streams and marshes, the Great Salt Bay estuary and the Damariscotta River. It includes thousands of native plant and animal species, plus all the exotics man has added. That is a lot to worry about and why we remain ever vigilant against sources of pollution, soil erosion and thoughtless exploitation of what can never be taken for granted. Added to such concerns, we now must keep our eyes on the major oceanic and atmospheric alterations threatening us with increasingly unpredictable and severe weather patterns with attendant floods and a predicted rise in sea level. This last issue continues to have our first attention as we garner all we can from the science available.

Damariscotta, in its modest way, is unquestionably the flagship for Lincoln County. It is partly a matter of location, partly its particularly fortunate natural beauty and lay of the land, but mostly its people, who have clung tenaciously to their history, their sense of place and their stubborn sense of who they are. The people frequently reflect on the “magic” of Damariscotta, and that is an indication of how it has evolved to this day in a much bigger and more dynamic world. A certain exclusivity and resistance to change, while seeming an obstacle to progress at times, have at the same time served as the check on those influences that might lead in misguided directions; they have, in effect, been the very agent that has preserved the essential character of Damariscotta, its most precious quality. We now are a community of purposeful souls charged with the management and perpetuation of the cultural and commercial heartbeat of our whole region. There are big changes afoot – there’s no denying it – but there are more of us now to do the job, and we are smarter and wiser. Comprehensive planning is the crucial exercise we must engage ourselves in.