



Shore and Harbor Planning Grants

Town of Freeport

Increasing Municipal Capacity to Preserve Working Waterfront and Coastal Access Through Collaboration with a Regional Planning Organization (Fiscal Year 2024, project awarded 2023)

“Freeport’s coastal access was identified during past planning processes as a key area of challenge to their economy and resilience. This project helped advance the municipality’s understanding of opportunities for building resilience for future climate impacts on the working waterfront and in preserving access points for shellfish harvesters. The approaches developed through the project can be shared regionally with other coastal communities facing the same challenges on their working waterfronts.” – Sara Mills-Knapp, Director of Sustainability, GPCOG



Left: Winslow Boat Ramp, Freeport, ME (2024). Right: Sand Beach, Freeport, ME (2024). Credits: Charles Tetreau

Project Description

The goal of this project was to create a replicable framework for identifying strategies to protect and expand coastal public access, as well as enhance working waterfront infrastructure to better support the varying fishing and aquaculture industries based in Freeport. The first portion of this project was a feasibility study to identify potential sites for future development of a public all-tide or deep-water boat ramp. The harbormaster and consulting engineers (GEI Consultants, Inc.) selected nine sites which were analyzed against 20 criteria, like waterfront suitability, environmental impact, parcel ownership, and upland suitability.

The second portion of this project focused on protecting and/or expanding walk-in access for shellfish harvesters. Many harvesters rely on handshake (verbal/informal) agreements for permission to cross private property and access intertidal mudflats. These agreements are not formally documented and are at risk of being lost if ownership of the property changes. The project team worked with Freeport Conservation Trust and Tidal Bay Consulting to send letters to over a dozen property owners who currently or previously allowed shellfish harvesters to walk through their properties. They met with over half of these property owners to discuss various options to preserve access but were unable to create any formal access agreements. However, landowner awareness was improved. The project team developed a template and companion resource for a written formal agreement for shellfish access. The template is based on a trail easement model, which is frequently used for other types of public access across private property, and the companion resource explains how the easement can be used in a shellfish access context. If an easement is established in the future, the access would only be for harvesters and would be held by the Town of Freeport and enforced by the Marine Resource Conservation Officer. Please contact Maine Coastal Program for a copy of the easement template.

The Town of Freeport partnered with the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) and Freeport Conservation Trust, and contracted Tidal Bay Consulting and GEI Consultants Inc. to complete the project. This initiative built on several other projects and resources including the [Working Waterfront Inventory Template](#) by Tidal Bay Consulting and Maine Coast Fisherman's Association, the [Community Intertidal Data Portal](#) by Tidal Bay Consulting, Viewshed, and GPCOG, [Preserving Access to the Intertidal Guidance Document](#) by the Casco Bay Regional Shellfish Working Group, the [Climate Smart Working Waterfront](#) project by The Gulf of Maine Research Institute, the [Gouldsboro Shore Project](#), and GPCOG's 2023 Shore and Harbor Planning Grant project with Manomet– [Protecting and Improving Shore Access in Casco Bay](#).

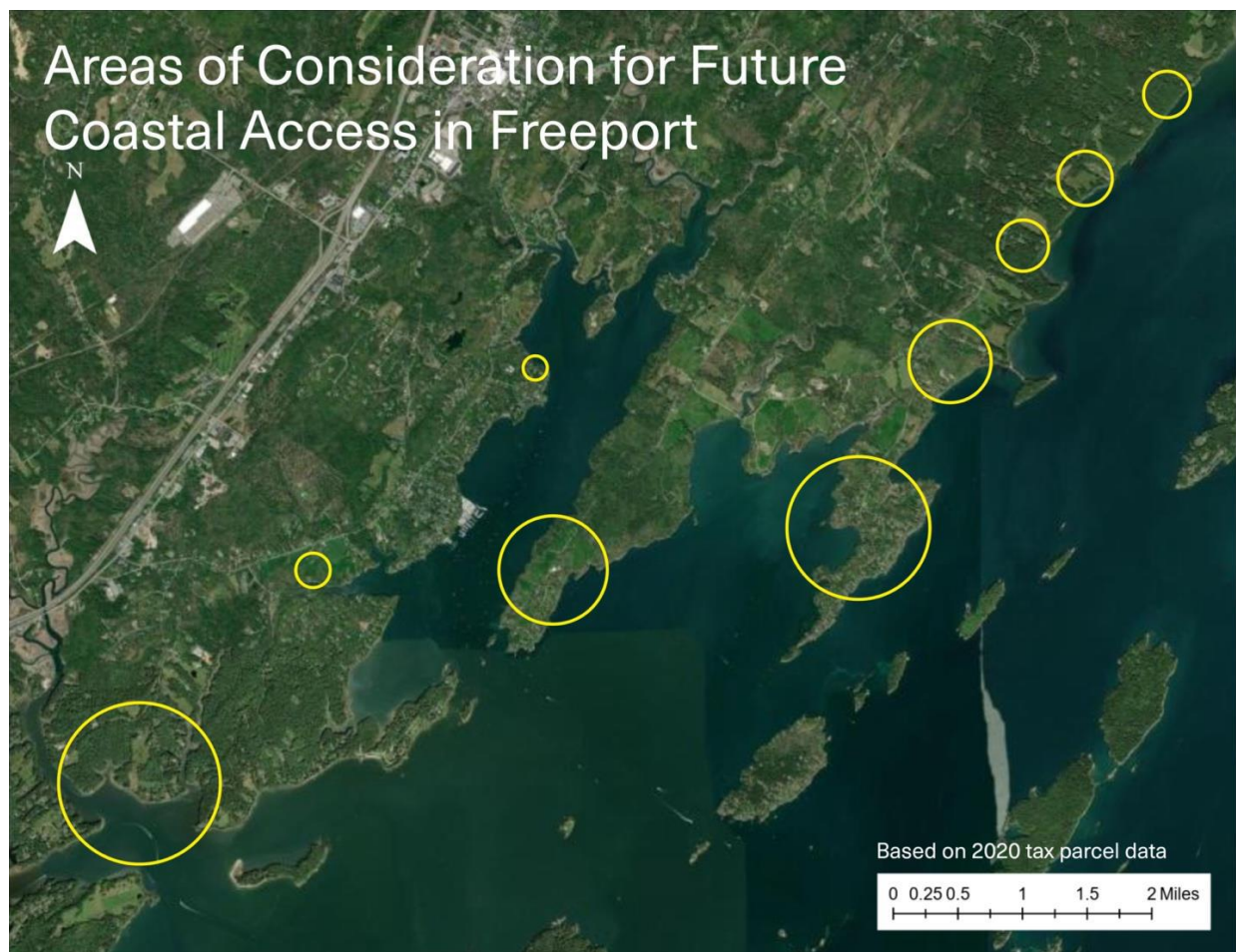


Photo of project team at a walk-in access site consulting with a riparian landowner. Credit: Jessica Joyce.

Project Results

The feasibility study for the future development of an all-tide boat ramp determined that all nine assessed sites are unsuitable for a boat ramp at this time. While the sites did contain some favorable conditions, many of them would need to be dredged for the ramp, and all of them had deed or easement restrictions that did not permit the construction of a public boat ramp. The feasibility study did conclude that several privately owned sites could be suitable for a boat ramp, if the sites were to go up for sale and if the Town of Freeport were to purchase them or secure a public access easement.

A general template for a trail shore access easement between a municipality and a private landowner was created to be used by other communities interested in replicating this process. A companion guide was also create to guide use of the template.



Appendix A – Areas of consideration for future deep water boat launch sites, based on landowner outreach and engineering analysis, taken from Freeport Deep Water Access Study by GEI Consultants, Inc. (p. A-4, 2024).

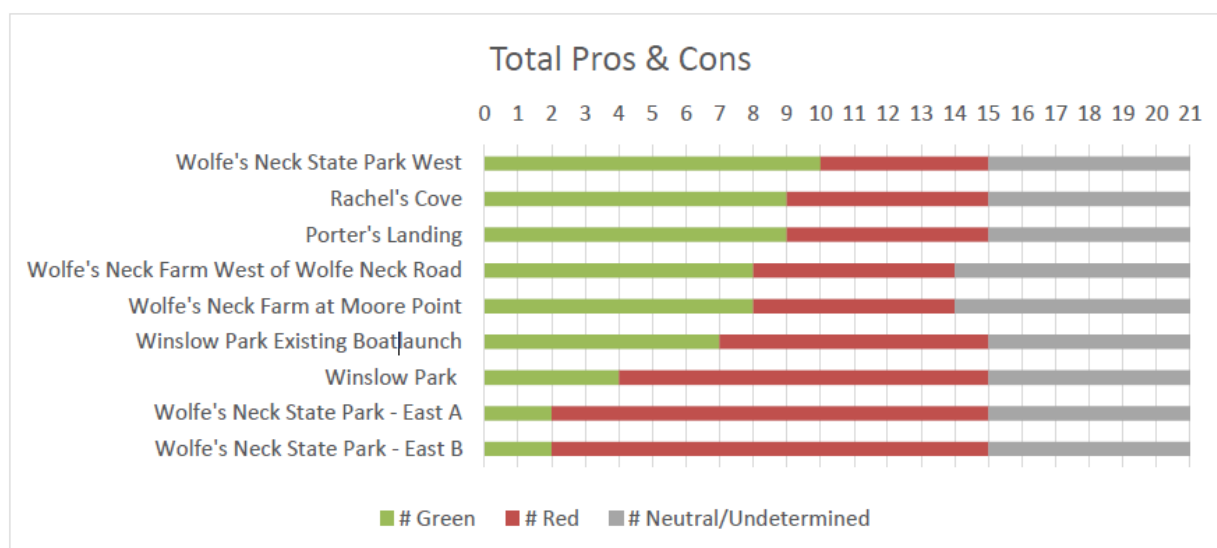


Fig. 5. Total Pros & Cons, taken from Freeport Deep Water Access Study by GEI Consultants, Inc. (p. 12, 2024)

Future Plans

The Town of Freeport recently finalized their first formal harvester access trail easement with a landowner. They also now have a record of high priority parcels that they can watch for potential sales for a deepwater boat ramp, and the Town and Freeport Conservation Trust will continue conversations with property owners to encourage formalizing more agreements for intertidal access. The project team is sharing knowledge gained from this project, as well as the methodology, for other communities to apply in their public access improvement efforts.

Lessons Learned

Public access preservation should start with a review of legal documents tied to a parcel, such as deeds, affidavits, and easements, to gain a foundational understanding of the legal access landscape of that parcel. Additionally, it is critical to speak with property owners, who could include private landowners, land trusts, non-profit organizations, and the state.

Thank you to Jessica Joyce and Sara Mills-Knapp for helping to prepare this summary.

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