

Friends of Midcoast Maine Annual Dinner  
June 15, 2006

This time last year Eleanor and I were just a couple of mild-mannered stay-at-home moms, with perhaps slightly above average news-junky tendencies. The tornado of the Size Cap campaign took us all by surprise.

When a reporter asked me in April if I would have taken this project on had I know what it would bring: the evenings away from my family, the late nights on the computer, all the adrenaline and anxiety, I said, “of course I would have, I wouldn’t have missed a minute.” But it is probably better that we didn’t know, that we were innocent and wide-eyed with idealism.

Eleanor and I threw ourselves into this campaign because we saw little alternative. This was about our own backyard, which meant two things: One is that we are all fiercely protective of that which is closest to us. But another is the feeling that if *I* don’t take care of my own backyard, who will?

The most compelling quality of the Size Cap campaign was its overwhelmingly personal nature. Whether you were for the size cap or against it, this was personal. You never heard people saying “ho hum, I just don’t really care one way or the other...” Our opposition was fired up about future prosperity and the rights of landowners to do what they want with their land. Our side was fueled by the sense of imminent threat to the place they love. People threw their time, talent, and financial resources behind the effort in a way that I have never experienced before.

The threat of Wal-Mart, and the inevitable changes that a Supercenter site bigger than Damariscotta’s entire downtown would bring helped people appreciate what we have here.

That love of place was palpable during the campaign. People seemed to smile more and take an extra minute to chat downtown. Having to parallel park and walk 3 blocks to the post office suddenly seemed more like a rare pleasure than an inconvenience. People an effort to shop locally, suddenly aware of how rare and possibly fleeting is the combination of locally owned department store, grocery store, pharmacy, and hardware stores. People talked about the Damariscotta River as home to one of the richest oyster beds in New England. A woman who came to one of our meetings said to

me, “If Wal-Mart goes in on that site I will never see the stars again.” This was personal, and people were willing to fight.

The campaign made for odd bedfellows. Traditional political alliances were thrown out the window, and new friendships forged. We owe our success to the fact that we could not be pigeonholed as people from away, or as tree-hugging liberals, or as anti-business preservationists, because we had natives and Republicans and pro-growth businesspeople pulling on the same oars.

Along with all of these incredibly positive things, the Size Cap effort highlighted some real fractures that cannot be ignored, most of all the wealth gap between people who make a living locally and people who bring income from out of state.

Even though I believe with all my heart that Wal-Mart has done more than any other corporation in the last 20 years to lower the standard of living for the working poor in this country, I never felt like I had a satisfactory answer for the question “After I get off an 8 hour day where I make \$8 an hour, where can I buy shoes for my kids that I can afford?”

That is why I am so happy to report that we are moving forward. The DRBA and the local Chamber are working together to address some of retail concerns. Local businesses are staying open late on Thursdays, and pulling together marketing campaigns to attract people to take another look at downtown and the fact that it is more affordable than you may think. Some engineers and businesspeople are meeting to talk about alternative energy as an economic development tool. A group calling itself Damariscotta 2020 is planning a charette project that will invite all residents of Damariscotta and surrounding towns to participate in the conversation about how we want to grow. Hopefully these efforts are just the beginning.

Of course, we know about the votes in Waldoboro and Wiscasset. Though they didn't go our way, and, don't get me wrong, we are licking our wounds, and worried about the future, all hope is not lost.

The town clerk in Waldoboro had to get more ballots printed in the middle of Election Day because 1500 wasn't enough. Issues of land use and growth get people talking and thinking and arguing. They pull us out of our daily routines and force us to ask tough questions about how we want to grow and who decides.

People up and down the Midcoast have injected their Town Offices with a dose of activism, filling previously empty planning board meeting halls and keeping local officials on their toes.

I am happy to report that democracy is alive and well. Who was the politician who said, in a concession speech, “The people have spoken. The bastards.”

The movement in the Midcoast was sparked by Wal-Mart’s stated intention to build. Without the presence of Wal-Mart these conversations would not have happened. Edgecomb, Newcastle, and Damariscotta now have Size Caps. Nobleboro has a moratorium with a size cap proposal in the works.

The question remains, how can we encourage towns in the rest of Maine to be proactive, to get involved in their future *before* the threat? The only way I can think of is to accept that large scale development is the way of the future, and no planning means developers will plan for us. Without resorting to fear tactics, I think towns must be realistic about the threats that lie ahead, and take action as if the wolf is at the door.

Like Eleanor said, Maine is ripe for development, and I for one don’t want Maine in the 2040s to look like Florida does now. The only way to prevent this is to pull together and start talking about what we do want for our future. I for one don’t want to leave our future in the hands of this particular wolf, the one with the capital W.

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