

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IMPACT REPORT

JULY 2024 ~ JANUARY 2025

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Prepared By

Town Manager's Office

30 Main Street

Freeport, ME 04032



# OVERVIEW

It is a unique and exciting time for economic development in Freeport. The community is at a moment of transition. The Town is updating ordinances and processes to put into practice the community's well-established vision.

Close coordination across Town boards, committees, and departments to elevate economic development goals is critical to retaining, attracting, and supporting local businesses and desirable housing and mixed-use development to move Freeport forward.

To advance the important goals of the Downtown Vision, Dog Bone transit-oriented development district, and other initiatives, Town leadership is elevating economic development as an organizational priority across departments. To this end, Town leadership has brought Planning and Codes into coordination with a new Development Director position within the Manager's Office.

In addition to driving business retention, expansion, and attraction activities, the Development Director is responsible

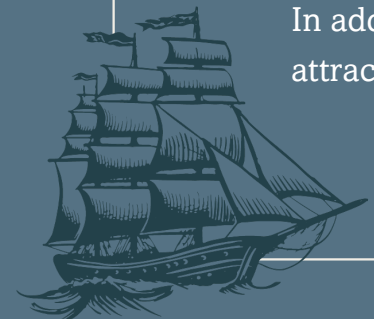
for helping advance measurable improvements in Town activities and processes to initiate and accelerate desirable development in alignment with Town goals.

In close collaboration with community partners and Town departments, the Development Director is charged with implementing an ambitious set of policy goals to support new housing creation, environmental sustainability, economic vitality, and experiential offerings in Freeport's village center.

This report summarizes the Town's economic development activities and impact since July 2024 and priorities for the balance of fiscal year 2025.

It was great meeting you the other day. The welcome I received on my first trip to Town Hall was above and beyond my previous experiences with local town governments, truly encouraging for a new Freeport business owner!

~ New Freeport Business Owner,  
December 2024



# IMPACT SUMMARY

OVER THE FIRST HALF OF THE FISCAL YEAR, THE DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR HAS FOCUSED ON THE FOLLOWING INTERRELATED ACTIVITIES:

## Business Retention & Expansion

*(see page 4 for additional details)*

- Engaged with 28 local businesses to facilitate access to resources or help remove regulatory barriers, including:
- Facilitating thoughtful zoning changes to enable expansion by local manufacturers
- Identifying gap financing to enable a local entrepreneur to purchase a new Main St. property
- Understanding business needs and identifying solutions

## Development and Attraction

*(see page 7 for additional details)*

- Supported development or attraction of eight businesses

- Deployed/committed over \$40,000 in Town Fit-Up funds matched at least 1 to 1 since July 2024
- Engaged with property owners and developers to generate future housing project prospects
- Facilitated a \$456,000 CDBG grant application to support a new regional childcare facility in Freeport with 18 employees and 100 childcare slots

## Policy & Planning

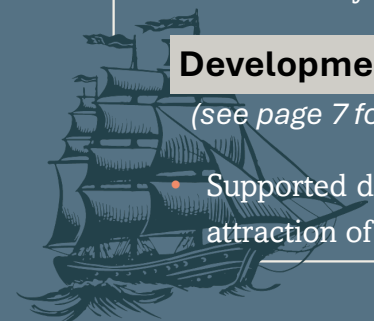
*(see page 9 for additional details)*

- Planned and coordinated the Dog Bone Work Group with implementation recommendations unanimously endorsed by the Town Council

- Integrated a transit-oriented development focus in Town planning efforts
- Supported implementation of the Downtown Vision with the Main Street Parklet reinstatement, public art installation, parking study, and support of local business ecosystem
- Participate on Comprehensive Plan Update and Design Review Ordinance internal management team
- Staff Housing Task Force and Complete Streets Committee
- Supported Subdivision review exemption for multifamily development projects to streamline

## Interdepartmental Implementation Coordination

- Hired new Town Planner and collaborated in reorganization of Planning Department roles and structure to expedite activities and implementation of the community's vision
- Support an integrated and customer-service oriented focus on solutions and responsiveness
- Elevate prioritization of policies that remove barriers to implementing the community's vision, like the recent Subdivision Review exemption for multifamily housing projects



# BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION

SINCE JULY 2024, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STAFF HAVE ENGAGED WITH 28 LOCAL BUSINESSES TO ADDRESS AND CLEAR BARRIERS TO GROWTH, IDENTIFY BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES, AND HELP RESOLVE ISSUES.

A key role of the Economic Development mission within the Town Manager's office is to help local businesses launch in Freeport, but also grow, invest, and expand in Freeport. Since the Covid pandemic, 71 percent of jobs nationally have been created by local businesses.<sup>1</sup> Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) is an economic development strategy focused on supporting Freeport companies to expand and create jobs locally. Successful BRE activities remove regulatory barriers and facilitate access to resources through public-private partnerships. In Freeport, staff implement BRE by staying in touch with local business owners and managers to understand their needs, anticipate upcoming challenges, and proactively identify solutions to help local companies stay and flourish in Freeport.



<sup>1</sup> U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY. SMALL BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE POST COVID ECONOMY. RETRIEVED ON JANUARY 28, 2025.

# BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION HIGHLIGHTS

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## Makers.Artists.Designers.Entrepreneurs

During the fall of 2024, local entrepreneur Melissa Wilkins sought to expand her innovative business, Freeport Market, from her location in Freeport Village Station to a second storefront by purchasing 31 Main Street in Downtown Freeport. Melissa aggregates handmade items from craftspeople, artisans, and makers throughout Maine to create a unique retail experience. To expand upon her budding success, Melissa envisions adding additional experiential offerings to her Freeport Market success, including a coffee/wine bar and, eventually, maker spaces. Town staff assisted Melissa to find critical gap financing from regional partner, Greater Portland Council of Governments, to complete the purchase of 31 Main Street, and facilitated a matching Fit-Up grant to install the coffee/wine bar slated to open in Spring 2025. Town support is ensuring that Melissa keeps her entrepreneurial energy in Freeport.

## Maine Beer Company

Located just south of Downtown Freeport, Maine Beer Company (MBC) is an iconic local brand that attracts 400,000 visitors annually, exports award winning and renowned ales across the United States and provides well-paying employment opportunities to over 100 people. To chart a course for continued growth in Freeport, MBC identified an adjacent parcel to its state-of-the-art brewery and tasting room on Route 1. The parcel, however, needed be rezoned for commercial use. Town staff collaborated with MBC through the rezoning process with a thoughtful approach that balanced MBC's and neighborhood needs with broader community goals, resulting in unanimous support from the Planning Board and Town Council to adopt the necessary zoning changes in December 2024. With Town support, MBC will launch its future from Freeport for years to come.



# BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION HIGHLIGHTS

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## Ben & Jerry's

A 30-year fixture in Downtown Freeport, Ben & Jerry's has offered cold refreshments to summer visitors and fueled post little-league game celebrations for residents over generations. When their tenure at their traditional location was disrupted due to construction, Ben & Jerry's owners sought a new location that would meet their business needs and keep the tradition alive. Economic development supported the franchise owners in their successful search and coordinated activities among Planning and Codes staff to ensure a smooth transition to a new Downtown home for Ben & Jerry's during summer 2025.

## AEC Engineering

AEC Engineering is a cutting-edge control systems, software, and automation technology provider that has been located at 172 Lower Main Street since the mid-1980s on a parcel where the Industrial 1 and Village Commercial 4 zones come together. Tim Hooper, AEC's third owner, acquired the company in March 2020 and tapped the growing automation trend to identify growth opportunities. Demand for AEC's innovative technologies required more manufacturing space, but longstanding provisions within the ordinance prevented AEC from adding on to their facility. Weighing options and potential locations, Tim reached out to Town staff for support. Together, Tim, the Planning Department, and Codes developed a zoning amendment strategy that honors the intent of the original ordinance but allows AEC to expand its production space. Following Planning Board input, the Board and Town Council unanimously supported AEC's zoning amendment request, and AEC's expansion has been approved and is slated for construction in Summer 2025.



# DEVELOPMENT & ATTRACTION

SINCE JULY 2024, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STAFF HAVE FACILITATED OR SUPPORTED THE PLACEMENT OF EIGHT BUSINESSES IN COMMERCIAL SPACES.

In addition to Business Retention & Expansion, Town Economic Development staff support new business development and attraction through targeted outreach, financial resources, and approval process guidance.

Strategic use of the Town's Fit-Up grant program and other financial resources, regular communication with local property owners, matchmaking with potential new businesses, and Town permitting support are core functions of business development and attraction activities.



# DEVELOPMENT & ATTRACTION HIGHLIGHTS

ADDING IN-HOUSE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CAPACITY AT TOWN HALL ENABLED FREEPORT TO PURSUE CDBG FUNDS AND RE-ENGAGE WITH THE PROGRAM FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS.

## Me Lon Togo

In spring 2025, a long-vacant commercial space below Vineyard Vines at 58 Main Street will become home to a unique West African and Modern European restaurant, Me Lon Togo. Entrepreneur Jordan Benissan, a native of Togo, was awarded a matching Fit-Up grant to transform the blighted space into a vibrant new addition to Freeport's restaurant scene, after Town staff facilitated access to the space.

## Color Me Salon Group

In opening a new salon at 475 US Route 1, Anton Kiesel encountered code issues and unexpected fit-up costs that threatened to sink the project. By accessing a matching Fit-Up grant and with timely support and guidance from the Town's Codes staff, the Town advanced Color Me Salon Group's success with support to install new plumbing and an attractive new floor to enhance the salon's visitor experience and ensure code compliance.

## CDBG Application to Support United 4 Childcare

Lack of childcare options generally, and affordable childcare options specifically, is a key challenge facing economic vitality in Freeport, Cumberland County, and across the State of Maine. To help local businesses and their employees address the childcare shortage, the Town partnered with local businesses, the property owners of 2 Stonewood Drive, and United Way of Southern Maine to develop Freeport's first Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) application to Cumberland County in recent years.

Staff worked with partners and County staff to tailor the application to maximize funding opportunities within the County's competitive process. If successful, the CDBG grant will inject critical funding to fit up a state-of-the art facility. When opened, the facility will create 18 childcare jobs with above-market wages and 100 childcare slots. Half of the slots will be eligible for State subsidy, increasing childcare options for a diversity of occupations.

## Grande Burritos

Local restaurateur Dom Petrillo accessed Fit-Up grant funds to transform retail space into a new casual burrito bar at 115 Main Street. Grande Burritos diversifies Freeport's food and beverage options in the heart of Downtown Freeport.





# POLICY & PLANNING

TO SUPPORT AN APPROACH TO PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT THAT SUPPORTS EXISTING BUSINESSES, WELCOMES NEW COMPANIES, AND INVITES INVESTMENT IN NEW PROJECTS, THE DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR COORDINATES OR SUPPORTS A VARIETY OF COMMUNITY INITIATIVES.

The Development Director position provides an economic development perspective on staff management teams for key long-range initiatives, including the Comprehensive Plan Update, Design Review Ordinance update, Downtown Vision, and transportation planning.



# POLICY & PLANNING

## Downtown Vision Plan Implementation

The DTV called for a variety of activities, policy updates, and investments to enhance the village center as an inviting place for visitors with new housing and mixed-use development.

### Main Street Parklet Advocacy

In collaboration with Town leadership and the Public Works Director, Economic Development staff leveraged a state network to successfully educate and advocate for reinstatement this coming summer of the popular public seating parklet in a converted Main Street parking space at about 120 Main Street.

### Pinkies Public Art Installation

Partnered with Meetinghouse Arts and other community stakeholders to support planning and installation of “the Pinkies,” at Town Hall through October 2025, including facilitating Town Momentum grant funding with a 3-1 private match.

### Downtown Infill Development Parking Analysis

Secured funding and coordinated completion of an infill housing and mixed-use parking analysis by Walker Consultants, who calculated that Downtown Freeport could add approximately 400 small apartments without creating a parking supply issue by adding a Downtown shuttle and other programs to provide access and convenience for visitors during the busy summer and holiday months.

### Local Business Ecosystem

The DTV called for diversified and experiential offerings from a new crop of local businesses and with support from the Fit-Up grant program, ten local businesses have filled vacant spaces, invested in upgrades to blighted commercial properties, and developed new services that bring local residents to the village center, such as health and fitness, food and beverage, and beauty and retail.

### Streamline Multifamily Housing Approvals

Collaborated with Planning and Codes staff to facilitate Planning Board and Town Council adoption to exempt multifamily housing projects from subdivision review, eliminating a redundant Project Review Board review for items covered in Site Plan review.



# POLICY & PLANNING

## **Dog Bone Work Group**

The transit-oriented development joint planning effort with representatives from Town Council, Planning Board, Complete Streets, Housing Task Force, Sustainability Advisory Board, Economic Development Corporation, and Town staff, analyzed land use, infrastructure, fiscal impacts and funding mechanisms to recommend the development strategy, and recommended action items, as a feasible approach to implementing the community's goals.

## **MaineDOT Planning Partnership Initiative**

Collaborated with Town leadership and MaineDOT staff to integrate into the PPI scope of work an implementation recommendation from the Dog Bone Working Group report: A build-out analysis and coordinated development design for land adjacent to the Route 1 corridor. This analysis will recommend ideal locations for any public ways, utility corridors, and bicycle and pedestrian amenities adjacent to developable land with the transit-oriented district. This economic development component in the PPI marries land use with transportation planning. The coordinated approach will help the Town make good decisions about the best use of scarce land and plan efficient infrastructure investments.

## **Housing Task Force Staff Liaison**

Support the Council-appointed task force who work to increase the supply and diversity of housing in Freeport. The Housing Task Force evaluates policy, project, and program options to identify opportunities for the Town to implement to reduce barriers to housing creation. The task force meets monthly and periodically makes recommendations to the Town Council and various boards.

## **Complete Streets Committee Support Staff**

Due to the close alignment of the Town's PPI, Dog Bone, and Downtown Vision initiatives with multi-modal transportation planning in Freeport, Economic Development staff will play a supporting role with the Town's committee charged with developing policy recommendations that support a diversity of mobility options, including safe bicycle and pedestrian facilities.



# GOALS & PRIORITIES FOR NEXT 6 MONTHS

## Business Retention and Expansion

- Continue outreach and engagement with business and property owners to understand needs
- Leverage professional network to facilitate access to resources
- Assist with approvals and navigating barriers

## Business Development and Attraction

- Fully deploy remaining \$50,000 in available Fit-Up grant funds to support the attraction or development of five new businesses in Freeport
- Targeted outreach to business prospects in priority business niches
- Assist new businesses locating in Freeport to navigate approval processes
- Identify and support three housing development projects

## Department Coordination and Collaboration

- Roll-out iWorq online permitting platform roll to streamline application processes, enhance customer service, and capture operational efficiencies
- Fully staff Planning Department with hiring of new Assistant Planner

## Support Planning and Cross-Committee Collaboration

- Staff Complete Streets Committee and Housing Task Force; liaise with FEDC
- Participate on Comp Plan, Design Review, and Downtown Vision internal management teams



# GOALS & PRIORITIES FOR NEXT 6 MONTHS

## **Implement Route 1 Corridor and Dog Bone Initiatives**

- Kick-off and advance the MaineDOT Planning Partnership Initiative to design Route 1 corridor upgrades and coordinated development design for adjacent land
- Advocate for codification of land use policies recommended in Dog-Bone report

## **Advance Tax Increment Financing (TIF)**

### **Development and Administration**

- Refine and advance the TIF renewal strategy identified in the Dog Bone report
- Elevate community education on Freeport's use of TIF and opportunities to implement community's vision with dedicated fundings
- Review and Update Town TIF Policy
- Facilitate state and local approval of Varney Heights Affordable Housing TIF

## **Elevate Community Outreach and Promotion**

- Promote local businesses and Town economic development programming with multi-media Growing Freeport Together business profile series
- Capture earned media to promote Freeport through press outreach about local businesses and the Town Fit-Up program success, and planning and policy work to support housing development;

