

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

DAMARISCOTTA, MAINE

Damariscotta is a picturesque coastal village with a rich history that can be dated back 2,500 years thanks to ancient oyster shell middens, remnant piles, left along the banks of the Damariscotta River by the Wawenock Abenaki. Historically, Damariscotta's economy was rooted in shipbuilding. Today, the town is a regional shopping and service center. In the summer months, the population grows with second homeowners and tourists.

POPULATION:
2,200

CHALLENGE:
Growth

FOCUS: Planning

KEY TOOL:
Action Plan

Local conditions:

Major development proposals in the early 2000s created controversy in this scenic coastal town. In 2005, in response to a proposed Wal-Mart, voters approved a 35,000-square-foot limit on retail buildings. The development was thwarted, but the divisiveness surrounding the issue underscored the need for a more proactive way to approach planning.

Managing growth and balancing the burgeoning tourist economy with the needs of the local community were front of mind when Heart & Soul launched in late 2008.

Damariscotta launched Community Heart & Soul® at the town's annual Great Pumpkin Fest and Regatta. The project was led by the Damariscotta Planning Advisory Committee, a 28-member board created by the town to advise the board of selectmen. Now, over ten years after Community Heart & Soul, the town is celebrating their long-term stewardship of Heart & Soul.

Damariscotta “by the numbers”:

- 1000+ residents engaged
- 6 Heart & Soul statements developed from hundreds of community members stories
- 95% of voters approved the new Comprehensive plan in 2014
- 10 years later the Heart & Soul statements are still governing decisions in Damariscotta

Volunteer and Community Response:

Nearly 1,000 residents were engaged through neighbor-to-neighbor chats, community conversations at potluck dinners, a growth survey, a community planning summit, and a youth survey.

Government officials engaged more regularly with residents through e-news and other forms of communication. For example, when sidewalks were being rebuilt, officials held meetings, went door to door, and sent out emails to hear from residents.

The town's 2014 comprehensive plan, which reflected the results of extensive community engagement, was approved by 95 percent of voters.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

The Heart & Soul statements generated by the residents of Damariscotta focused on the things that make Damariscotta great, now and in the future:

- We can work locally and can grow locally owned businesses.
- We have a strong sense of community where people trust one another and feel safe.
- We are an involved community that participates in schools, organizations, churches and community events and festivals.
- We appreciate the proximity of culture and nature. Right out our back doors we might see a seal or a moose, but we also have fine restaurants, art galleries, theater, bookstores, and library, all within walking distance.
- We have easy access to goods and services, to local government and to information.

Over the following decade Damariscotta residents not only focused on the things that led to their 2014 Comprehensive plan but also on creating key improvements to the unique character of Damariscotta.

Heart & Soul was instrumental in the approval of the Comp plan in 2014. But the decisions the community made then live on in real activities and actions today.

Over a decade after Heart & Soul began, it lives on in Damariscotta. It continues to guide actions within the city, and a Facebook page is still up, running, and actively engaging residents.

In late 2019, over 100 community members celebrated the community successes since Heart & Soul and connected these to their Heart & Soul statements. Specific outcomes include:

- linking downtown and other parts of the community via trails and sidewalks
- developing new community meeting space for large groups and events
- developing an outdoor skating rink
- funding waterfront improvements through grants, business donations, private commitments, and tax revenues
- protecting animal habitat
- public safety and accessibility work
- increased collaboration between organizations, and
- new volunteers engaging in down projects.

Town Manager Matt Lutkus noted, “Our 10-year CH&S celebration allowed our community to recognize all the achievements that have been guided by our Heart & Soul, including our Comp Plan, a Natural Habitat Initiative, Historic Preservation work and the new focus of our Public Access and Safety committee. After a decade of CH&S, we celebrated all the success that has been achieved within our community and have recommitted to embracing our Heart & Soul for the future.”

As Board of Selectmen Chair Robin Mayer, put it, “Civic engagement in Damariscotta’s planning and economic growth that began over 10 years ago with the implementation of the Heart & Soul project is still very much alive and well in Damariscotta. The community continues to stress what matters most to retain its New England charm while moving into the 21st century. We would not be as grounded without community involvement.”

Community Heart & Soul gave Damariscotta more than the typical document that simply sits on the shelf, the lasting impact lives on within the efforts and residents within the community, every day.