

Eliot residents have their say

More than 500 respond to plan surveys

By **David Ramsay**

news@seacoastonline.com

February 29, 2008 6:00 AM

ELIOT, Maine — Some 43 Eliot residents braved the elements Wednesday night to learn the results of recent resident surveys, which are a key component of the town's comprehensive plan update.

More than half of the residents did not support raising taxes to pay for preserving open spaces or other new programs, committee member Bill Hamilton said.

Like neighboring communities, Eliot is struggling to retain its rural character, protect its open spaces, farms, rivers and wetlands, and somehow find creative ways to meet the challenges of guiding new development in the face of increasing traffic, an aging population and declining school enrollment.

Led by Selectwoman Elizabeth O'Donoghue, the Comprehensive Planning Committee has been doing its homework and had some positives to report at the meeting.

Hamilton was pleased that 550 Eliot residents (of the 3,100 who received them) took the time to answer a detailed survey and express their views about the future of the community.

In response to a question about how the town would be able to pay for the new programs, Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission Director Paul Schumacher said, "We have to get creative."

"Eighty-eight percent of the people supported the idea of charging an impact fee to developers to offset the costs to the town for police, water, sewer and schools that result from new housing," he said.

He suggested that the town work closely with local land trusts that work with communities to preserve open space and natural areas through purchasing land and easements that keep lands from being developed.

He also pointed out that by just getting the plan approved by the Maine State Planning Office — a daunting challenge — more grants and funds would become available from the state and federal government.

Residents readily agreed with the survey results and SMRPC's assessment that transportation was the biggest issue facing the town.

"The level of traffic has more than doubled on Route 236 since the 1980s and there are many sections that have 'Level F,' which is the worst level. We can expect a lot more areas to get worse if we don't do something about it," said Schumacher.

While recognizing the traffic is a regional issue along the Route 236 corridor, Schumacher pointed out that "development along 236 was not magical," but was encouraged by the spread-out growth pattern caused by the large-lot (three-acre) zoning along the road.

O'Donoghue welcomed input from residents who should contact the committee by e-mail at eliotcompplan@gmail.com or consult the town's Web site at www.eliotmaine.org. Residents should also plan to attend upcoming meetings of the committee at which specific policies would be formulated to address the issues at hand.