

Meet the new High Street: Islanders complain of scant services for high taxes

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Newburyport Daily News
5/12/08
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PLUM ISLAND — If there's a street paved with gold in Newbury, it's the beachfront part of Fordham Way.

It runs parallel to the beach for about a quarter mile, near where the pristine Parker River Wildlife Refuge meets civilization.

There's about 30 buildings packed closely together just a few yards from the narrow street. Like much of the island, it's a mish-mash of old, new, fancy, and rustic — for instance old ranch-style cottages, new three-story villas, and the elegant hotel "blue, the Inn by the Beach." There's not much land — about seven acres, according to town assessor records.

But the value of the land and homes, and the taxes paid on them, is staggering.

That stretch of Fordham Way is valued at \$24.74 million by the town of Newbury.

Fordham Way's eye-popping value rivals "The Ridge," the most exclusive section of Newburyport's High Street. The elegant Federal mansions and well-manicured homes that run along The Ridge from State Street to March's Hill are valued at about \$25.15 million, about 2 percent more than the smaller, more tightly-packed Fordham Way neighborhood.

When it comes to taxes, the comparison gets more entwined. The Ridge generates about \$250,000 in taxes. That short stretch of Fordham Way pays \$212,000 — big money for Newbury, almost 2 percent of all the property tax money it collects.

Those dollar signs don't go unnoticed on the island — an island that is valued, and taxed, at almost two-thirds of a billion dollars.

Plum Island's plea for relief from erosion has pulled the lid off a debate that has quietly simmered for years. The debate boils down to money and fairness — or more specifically, land values, taxes, wisdom, and perhaps most of all, perceptions.

Some on the mainland sharply criticize the frantic call for help from islanders who built enormous homes on the notoriously shifting sands of a barrier beach. Why should they be asked to help bail out someone else's folly?

Islanders counter that they pay big tax bills, and get few services in return. They're a cash cow for Newbury and Newburyport, but many feel they're treated with contempt.

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The argument

Plum Island landowners have long complained that they pay an enormous tax burden. As early as the 1970s, when the last major round of erosion struck, some islanders argued bitterly that they paid \$4 of every \$10 in taxes that Newbury collected. It's difficult today to verify those figures.

But the evidence of the recent rapid growth in Plum Island waterfront property values, and increased in tax burden, is clear.

"Anything with water influence has gone wild in recent years, from Maine to Florida," said Dan Raycroft, Newburyport's assessor. "It's that desirability, to be near water."

No other class of property in Newburyport has escalated in value as fast as waterfront land, he said. On the island, there are hundreds of waterfront or water-view properties that have seen their values — and tax bills — skyrocket. In many cases, old drafty cottages have been torn down and replaced with large year-round homes, making values grow even more.

Ron Barrett, an islander and president of the Plum Island Taxpayers and Associates, said he's heard the complaints that mainlanders have about grandiose building on the island. He laments many of the changes, but also counters that the island is like a business park from a tax point of view — it generates lots of taxes, and has few public expenses. There's relatively few kids in the school system, and little police or fire department presence. Islanders have water and sewer service, but they had to pay all the costs of installing the lines. The biggest expense the island incurs, he argues, is road maintenance.

"We are the industrial park of Newburyport and Newbury," he said. "We don't get the big services, we get the highway department, one of the lowest cost departments in the town."

Barrett is hardly alone in judging the island as a major, and vulnerable, source of money for Newbury and Newburyport.

"Can the communities of Newbury and Newburyport survive without the property taxes paid by these Plum Island property owners?" wrote Mark Farrell in a letter to The Daily News. "The towns should pay up now, or they will surely pay later."

"With the destruction of the homes on Plum Island, Newbury's tax base disappears. Triton collapses without funding, town workers are not paid and Newbury falls into bankruptcy. The homes on the Newburyport section of the island become unreachable and Newburyport loses its Plum Island tax base," wrote Kevin Hunt. "It's easy to say let nature take its course, especially if it's not your house. When the effect of nature's course means the destruction of a regional economy, we better do something immediately! There are solutions."

There's one radical solution some islanders have considered, though it won't solve erosion — splitting off from Newbury and Newburyport and forming their own town. The idea dates back at least 30 years.

"We still talk about it a lot," said Barrett, as he calculated how islanders might spend the almost \$6 million in taxes that they pay to Newbury and Newburyport. "We'd either join Newbury, or split off completely and form our own town."

Cut off

The Newburyport section of Plum Island has an unusual aspect — it's completely cut off from the rest of the city. You must drive almost two miles through Newbury to get to it. There's no other community in the area that has a similar arrangement.

Newburyport islanders have long argued that they are often overlooked by the rest of the city, and one of the prime examples they see is the former Plum Island fire station.

The station was built at the northern end of the island in 1966, and for years was staffed by volunteers.

Two aspects of the island make it especially vulnerable to big fires — the high density of wooden buildings, many of which are old and dry, and the strong winds that can roar along the coast.

"Fire is scary down there, especially with that wicked wind and the tinderboxes," said Barrett.

Island fires have had catastrophic results. Barrett can recall several, including one that destroyed eight cottages.

In 2004, the derelict station was quietly torn down, the last order submitted by outgoing mayor Al Lavender. The move came as a surprise to many, although town boards had been reviewing the permitting for months.

"It had deteriorated to the point that it is really not repairable," Lavender said at the time.

"Some are glad it came down, others are upset," said then-Ward 1 councilor Jeremy Gillis, speaking on behalf of island residents who had contacted him. "Even though it wasn't in use, it was the island's only firehouse."

The fire station's demise roared up as an issue in 2006, when the drawbridge connecting the island to the mainland got stuck. A man on the island suffered a heart attack and died. Police and firefighters made heroic efforts to save him — a police officer carrying a defibrillator jumped over the bridge span and commandeered a car, and off-duty firefighters on the island did their best to help the man.

Newburyport firefighters noted not having the island station meant slower response time.

"It's been an issue for many years, but it's been falling on deaf ears," said Newburyport Fire Lt. Barry Salt at the time.

Larry McCavitt, the Ward 1 councilor whose district includes the island, said the likelihood of the station ever reopening is remote.

"Whenever they start talking among the rest of the council about it, it immediately escalates into four, five or six employees. It rapidly becomes a fairly big expense, and the talk doesn't go further than that."

Laurel Silvia, who lives in the Newburyport end of the island, has seen both sides of the issue. She and her husband moved to the island about 12 years ago, and before that, they lived in mainland Newburyport.

Since moving to the island, she's noticed some examples of neglect — for instance, the beach gets raked only sporadically now.

"It seems like Plum Island is always on the back burner, which is a shame because it's such a nice asset to the city," she said.

Truth or fiction?

So who is telling the facts when it comes to Plum Islanders' tax burden and the services they get in return?

The answer is a mixed bag.

When it comes to schools, islanders are correct when they argue that there are relatively few island kids who attend local public schools. Schools are the single biggest expense for local communities, typically accounting for about 50 cents of every tax dollar.

In the Newbury section of the island, there's 74 students who attend the Triton Regional School District. They account for just 7 percent of the Newbury students who attend Triton, according to figures provided by the school district.

In the Newburyport end, there's 55 students who attend the public schools. That's about 2.4 percent of the students in the Newburyport Public Schools.

Plum Islanders in the Newbury end of the island aren't far off when they argue they are paying a big share of their town's taxes. But records show it may not be as large as some perceive.

There certainly is a gold coast on the island, but there are also many humble homes on small lots that fall far below the town's average assessed value for a single family home of \$482,600. For instance, assessors' records show nearly every home along the beachfront side of Northern Boulevard — whether they be renovated cottages or new three-story villas — is assessed at \$1 million or more. But on the other side of the street, most home values are half that. Many inland side streets have small cottages with values in the \$380,000 to \$420,000 range.

Taken as a whole, Plum Island is enormously valuable, given its small land mass. The value of taxable property on the Newbury section of the island alone is \$399 million, according to the Newbury assessors office. Taxes paid by islanders makes up 28 percent of property taxes collected in Newbury.

But there's also a very large concentration of buildings on the island, compared to the rest of Newbury. The island's grid of small lots makes it the most densely populated part of the town. The 729 homes and businesses on the island constitute about 26 percent of Newbury's built-on lots.

The Newburyport end of the island is a similar story. There's 515 homes and businesses, which is about 7 percent of Newburyport's building count. Records at the Newburyport assessors office show the value is about \$247 million, which is about 7 percent of Newburyport's total taxable value.