

If you don't build, no one will come

Zara Norman
Bangor Daily News

If you want to see how a town can die, go to Harpswell, Maine, said Zara Norman. In the 1990s, the coastal town of some 5,000 about an hour north of Portland "was building an average of 50 homes a year," but as that boom slowed in the early aughts, "home prices and incomes kept rising." Affordable housing stock began to disappear, and nothing was built to replace it. Not a single unit of "multifamily housing has been approved since the 1980s." Two decades ago, "town officials rang the alarm bell and commissioned a study of Harpswell's housing stock," and the results "were grim." Young families "increasingly could not afford a first home" in Harpswell,

and "roughly 2 in 5 renters were burdened by housing costs." Yet though the town could see where things were going, nothing was done. Harpswell is now seeing the outcome that was not only predictable but also predicted. Today, an average home there is \$742,000, with only a "handful of properties under \$400,000" for sale. Now Harpswell is "the oldest community in Maine, with 38 percent of the population older than 65." Yet the town is still shooting down efforts to build. So many young families have left that its two schools have been consolidated into one. Now that one may close too, and all that will be left will be a "rich enclave" of retirees.

Not long ago, in America's "great shoplifting freak-out" stores