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Stonington select board cheers new federal grants for the Island

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BY JACK BEAUDOIN



STONINGTON—With much of the 2026 budgetary work behind them, members of the Stonington select board had a chance to savor some good news on recent federal appropriations at their February 9 meeting.

Three days earlier, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, announced that \$12 million for the Deer Isle Causeway project had been included in the Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations bills signed into law so far this year. Earlier on Monday, Economic and Community Development Director Linda Nelson received word from the office of Sen. Angus King, D-Maine, that a \$2 million request for harbor dredging around the town's Fish Pier had also been approved in the federal budget.

"That's the first step in a plan to reconstruct and raise the Fish Pier," Nelson told select board members, reminding them of the original plan that was first formulated back in 2020-21. She said the dredging would return the harbor's original berthing depth by removing the accumulated sediment, silt, and debris and restoring necessary water depths for safe vessel operation. Then, a second \$2 million grant, if approved, will be used to restore and raise the fish pier as a resiliency measure in the face of sea level rise, while a third step would integrate those improvements with a plan to utilize the waterfront adjacent to the recently acquired Odd Fellows Hall

"We're really happy and grateful to our congressional delegation," said Nelson.

"People keep asking me what we're going to do with the Odd Fellows Building," Select Board Chair Donna Brewer said, cheering the progress of the town's ongoing efforts to preserve and improve its working waterfront. "I'll say that we've got some plans, but they don't want to hear that."

As for the causeway grant, the money will be used to raise the two causeways linking Deer Isle, Little Deer Isle and the Deer Isle-Sedgwick Bridge—the sole route connecting the Island to the mainland. The Maine Department of Transportation has spent nearly three years studying alternatives and conducting engineering studies, so the effort to raise the causeways to a height of 13 to 14 feet to counter sea level rise is a shovel-ready project that simply awaited funding.

Town Manager Kathleen Billings said that the recent grant awards, like many of the others that preceded them, can be directly attributed to the town's comprehensive plan. "You can't get these funds without having a good plan in place," she said.

"The more we keep it up to date and maintain, the more the money comes in," Nelson agreed.

Comp plan update timeline

The references to the comprehensive plan were timely, since the town has just signed a contract with the Hancock County Planning Commission, a quasi-governmental agency that provides towns with technical expertise in planning, mapping, and a range of other services.

Executive Director Averi Varney said she was looking forward to the process because the town has been so successful in leveraging its current comp plan and because it will not require a complete rewrite. "You are one of the few towns that has maintained its comprehensive plan," she said, which should shorten the timeline to completion. In response to a question from Brewer, Varney said the update will represent a series of small changes to the existing plan rather than an overhaul.

"Although we're still working it out, the timeline can last anywhere from six months to 24 months," Varney said. I hear you are hoping to have it on the shorter end of the spectrum."

Billings said that while the current comprehensive plan has been successful, it's also beginning to show its age. "In ten years, a lot of things have changed," she said, noting that much of the data in the previous plan was collected back in 2017-2018. "That's pre-pandemic, pre-storms, pre-droughts... pre-everything."

Nelson said recent work on sea level rise, the town's economic resiliency strategy, housing task force findings and the Village Partnership grant would all need to be integrated into the next iteration of the plan.

Varney agreed, adding that her team would supplement that through public engagement, including visioning sessions, surveys and a focus group; land use inventories and analysis updates; and assessing fishing opportunities and vulnerabilities.

"There will be a lot of back and forth with the town," she said. "Once we get a committee formed, we'll dive right into it. In fact, we've already begun to dive into some things."

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