

HOBBA Business Association Meeting Summary — September 17, 2026

Downtown Searsport businesses and the closing of Hey Sailor

The meeting opened with considerable concern about the closing of **Hey Sailor** and the effect another vacant storefront could have on downtown Searsport. Members described downtown businesses as struggling, with revenues down and some businesses planning to close for the winter. There was also frustration that nearby businesses apparently received little or no advance notice of the closure.

Several possible responses were discussed:

- Contact the property owner/realtor to determine what might be possible with the Hey Sailor space.
- Explore a temporary holiday **pop-up shop**, perhaps featuring local crafts, so the storefront does not sit empty.
- Ask permission to use the storefront windows for posters advertising local events and businesses.
- Approach James, and ask who purchased the nearby Hitchborn property? and connect us with the agent, who was said to be handling the Hey Sailor property.

The group also discussed the broader challenge of sustaining Searsport restaurants and retail businesses through the winter. Participants contrasted Searsport with Belfast, where restaurants, shops, cultural activities, and major winter events help generate year-round activity. Splendiferous Sweet Shop owner said local patronage is particularly limited during the winter and described plans to rely more on online sales, wholesale sales, craft shows, and occasional events rather than remaining continuously open.

Marketing Searsport and cross-promoting regional events

A major theme was shifting the message away from businesses that are closing and toward **what is open and what visitors can do**.

Dorothy from the Belfast Chamber offered to promote Searsport-area activities through the Chamber's Thursday newsletter. She said it reaches approximately 1,600 people and reported a roughly 60% open rate in the first 24 hours. The idea was to compile events for the next two or three months and provide them to the Chamber. Miriam was asked to help, although participants noted that Gina may already maintain an online listing that could simply be shared with the Chamber.

There was strong agreement about **cross-promotion** among Searsport, Belfast, Stockton Springs, Bucksport, and surrounding communities rather than treating them as competitors. Participants repeatedly noted that visitors staying in one town travel throughout the region.

The group also discussed developing visitor itineraries rather than simply handing people lists or maps: for example, telling visitors where to shop, eat, visit the harbor, walk trails, visit museums, or bicycle. Participants felt personal recommendations are particularly valuable and could distinguish locally owned businesses from increasingly impersonal online/AI-driven travel marketing.

Tourism opportunities

Several potential strengths of Searsport and the surrounding area were identified.

One is the area's large amount of accessible **green space, trails, coastline, and outdoor recreation**, including Sears Island, Sandy Point, Long Cove Preserve, Moose Point State Park, and nearby Fort Knox. Participants felt these assets are under-promoted and increasingly distinctive as public access to coastal land becomes more limited elsewhere.

Another is recreational clamming. The Searsport shellfish program offers three-day recreational licenses, reportedly selling about 150 per year, with demonstrations sometimes offered at low tide. The committee has also been reseeded local clam flats, including approximately 30,000 soft-shell clams and 30,000 quahogs this year.

Participants also saw an opportunity to position Searsport and the surrounding region as a quieter alternative or base for travelers visiting Acadia and Bar Harbor. Innkeepers reported hearing from guests who enjoyed staying away from Bar Harbor's crowds while still making day trips there. They cited longer stays and repeat guests as encouraging trends, even though overall visitor numbers or bookings were reportedly down.

Parking, waterfront access, and downtown infrastructure

Downtown parking was identified as a persistent problem, especially during the summer. Participants said the recent downtown renovation reduced the number of spaces and expressed concern that there appears to be little or no designated public handicap parking downtown. They also discussed visibility problems caused by vehicles parking near intersections.

Possible options mentioned included:

- Better use/signage of existing town-owned parking.
- Exploring arrangements with churches, the museum, or other property owners.

- Considering the large parking area behind the former TD Bank.
- Improving the waterfront-access area near the former Hamilton Marine property.
- Continuing to explore whether an existing right-of-way behind the church could become a public walking path.

Association communications

Several members said the meeting notice had landed in their spam folders. The association's Mailchimp email had apparently received relatively few opens.

There was general agreement that future meeting notices should be distributed through **both email and text message**, with text at least serving as a reminder and containing a link to the full information. The group will need to gather members' cell-phone numbers and investigate whether anything can be done to improve Mailchimp delivery.

Upcoming events mentioned

- A substantial portion of the meeting involved sharing events that could will attract visitors and support cross-promotion. These included a concert at Union Hall associated with a large gathering of musicians at Searsport Shores;
- **Strung Together - September 18 - 20th**
beginning with a street dance featuring the Misfit Toys at Mermaid Plaza
- **Fling into Fall - September 25 - 26**
- **Sardine Festival - October 3rd**

Annie and the Rainmakers at the Church

A possible Searsport winter home tour in early December was mentions and other concerts, craft activities, and holiday events.

There was also interest in reviving or creating additional off-season programming, including the possibility of an Oktoberfest-type event at Captain Nickels for winter community activities.

Belfast Chamber “Business After Hours”

The Belfast Chamber is beginning to schedule **Business After Hours events for 2027**. Dorothy noted that one has not been held in Searsport recently. At least two participants/businesses expressed interest in hosting, Downeast Auctions and Captain Nickels Inn potentially during January–April.

Town government and community participation

Late in the meeting, discussion turned to a local group or social-media activity criticizing town government and taxes. The name and nature of the group were unclear. Steve and Mark defended the town's budgeting process, emphasized that budgets are ultimately voted on at the annual town meeting, and argued that residents should participate in meetings rather than relying primarily on social-media commentary.

The conversation also touched on the difficulty small municipalities are having obtaining required audits. Steve said Searsport was three years behind and had been quoted approximately \$100,000 for an audit.

Dietary needs and tick-related illness

Near the end, a participant raised awareness of **alpha-gal syndrome associated with tick bites**, explaining that affected customers may need foods without mammalian products and may therefore ask restaurants for vegan or dairy-free options. The business-oriented takeaway was to encourage restaurants and food businesses to respond constructively when customers ask about such options and to recognize that some requests stem from medical dietary restrictions rather than preference.

Most concrete follow-up items

The clearest actions emerging from the discussion were to

- **contact the Hey Sailor property representatives about temporary use of the space/windows;**
- **get the Searsport event listing to the Belfast Chamber;**
- **increase systematic cross-promotion of area events;**
- **send association meeting notices by both email and text;**
- **investigate Mailchimp/spam issues;**
- **send event flyers and information to the Chamber newsletter;**
- **explore a Searsport Business After Hours event for early 2027;**
- **continue conversations about visitor itineraries, downtown parking, and waterfront/public access.**

There did **not** appear to be a series of formal motions or votes assigning each of these tasks; many were suggestions or informal commitments rather than formally adopted actions.