

Friends of Casco Bay
Community Engagement Committee – Minutes
Hybrid Meeting: In-person at GMRI and Online via Zoom
Monday, April 3, 5:30-6:30 p.m.

In attendance

Board: Kirsten Piacentini (Committee Chair), Bud Higgins, Pat Ianni, David Kaufman, Sandy Marsters, Seb Milardo, Joan Samuelson

Staff: Susan Bosco, Will Everitt, Sara Freshley, Robby Lewis-Nash, Sarah Lyman

Welcome – *Kirsten Piacentini, Committee Chair*

Kirsten welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked everyone to share their favorite spring cleaning activity.

Debrief of *Water as Inspiration: Art and Casco Bay*

Robby reviewed what the event was for those who were not able to attend. We invited three regional artists to join us for an online panel discussion about art, the environment, and Casco Bay. All three artists – Anna Dibble, Mitchell Rasor, and Jan Piribeck – make art that is focused on the environment and the water. We planned this event to diversify the topics we cover in our public facing events, which are usually focused on science and environmental policy. By hosting an event that focused on the Bay through the lens of art, we hoped that we could engage our members in a new way.

Bud said he enjoyed the show and that Robby did a great job hosting the event; he was calm and inviting. Bud had not thought about the connection between art and the Bay before. Maine has a long history of artists making work here. Bud thinks we should consider engaging Maine College of Art (MECA) students in our work more. Will said that one of our panelists, Mitchell Rasor, is a teacher at MECA, along with Board Member Deb Debiegun (who recommended we reach out to Mitchell). Pat said the event was curated well, we had great panelists, and Robby did a good job facilitating.

Kirsten asked how we selected our panelists. Robby said staff brainstormed potential artists, drawing on the relationships we already have. Staff then asked Deb Debiegun and Ellen Grant for additional recommendations; Deb for her connections at MECA, and Ellen for her knowledge of regional artists (Ellen put Robby in touch with her friend Lindsay Hancock, a landscape painter who gave us some great recommendations). With a long list of artists established, staff narrowed the list down looking for artists whose work seemed most connected to ours. Staff also sought to put together a panel of artists who work in a variety of mediums.

Sandy said he was unable to attend. He asked if there was a way that staff could post the event recording more quickly, perhaps the day after the event. Sarah said we edit videos before posting them, which is time consuming. We send an email to notify members when videos are posted. To avoid sending multiple emails in one week on the same topic, we often send the recordings in the weeks following the event.

Bud asked Robby how the artists reacted to the event. Robby said all the panelists were enthusiastic about the event, both before and after. It was a great experience for everyone. Sandy said it sounds like the event was a huge success. Pat agreed, mentioning that the Maine Island Trail Association (MITA) was hosting an environmental art exhibition in the same week as our event. Pat thinks articulating the connection between environmental art and advocacy is timely.

Sandy said he would like the board to brainstorm ideas for future events like this. This could include ideas of artists to host for another arts panel, or new event ideas all together that emphasize artistic or other connections to the Bay.

Development Metrics Discussion – *Development Director Sarah Lyman*

Sarah explained that there are many ways to look at our development metrics. There will be more opportunities to talk about them at the April board meeting. One way to look at the metrics is through the lens of donation source, whether that is households, corporations, or foundations. We can also break down our donations by the level of giving, and many other ways.

Sarah said the total number of households that donate to us decreased over the past two years. Usually we want this number to go up, but there are two possible reasons for the decline. In FY20 we began silent donations to the Climate Change and Casco Bay Fund Capital Campaign (FY20 is marked with a “ † ” on the development metrics to note this). When we do capital campaigns, we expect to see a sharp increase in our total number of individual donors, followed by a decrease in the years afterward. These metrics show a similar trend in FY13 (marked with “**”) when we launched a capital campaign to purchase our new Baykeeper boat. Kirsten commented that despite year-to-year drops, the overall trend is that our number of individual donors is increasing.

Sarah reviewed our FY23 renewal rate—the number of new donors in FY22 who gave again in FY23, which we have a good rate for. If these people continue to give for a few years, it is very likely that they will remain steady donors. Will added that recruiting lapsed donors is also important. In FY21, when we launched the public phase of the Climate Change and Casco Bay Fund, many lapsed donors gave to us. Sarah said that is why our Strategic Plan includes a new capital campaign in the coming years.

Sandy asked what happened in FY17-18 when we had a high number of new donors. Will said that FY17-18 were the years when we held the most public events. Then our staff shrunk and the pandemic came. Launching our capital campaign during the pandemic helped us grow our membership despite the circumstances. In recent years we have not hosted nearly as many in-person events as we have in the past, which may have caused the number of new members to decrease. Will also added that last year he was acting as Interim Executive Director at the same time that he was still serving as our Development Director, which may have limited the strength of our development program.

Pat noted the high number of lapsed donors who returned in FY23, and said she thinks these numbers look great. Kirsten asked us to describe our strategy with our donation ask letters, including differences for first time donors. First time donors receive a welcome package with their thank you note. Members receive a series of letters asking them to renew their membership annually. New donors, before receiving their renewal ask, are sent a “first time report,” 10 months after their first donation. It describes what we accomplished with their support. Donors who meet a certain donation threshold will continue to receive these reports every year. When Will and Sarah are working on letters they write personal notes, adding details like how long the donor has supported us. Sarah said we get more specific with our strategy for the annual fund, where we often ask donors to support a specific program or area of work. Kirsten said this sounds similar to her work at L.L.Bean, where new buyers will receive a package of targeted communications following a purchase.

Sandy asked if there is any consideration for altering or adding to our strategy. Sarah said these metrics are very new so they are still sinking in. We will experiment with new strategies, however we will focus on what we already do well and know works (like capital campaigns, house parties, etc.).

David said these numbers look great. David asked how many members we have and how many people we solicit overall to arrive at our current membership. Will said that it’s hard to pin down a precise number of members because our membership count is based on the number of people who donated over the past two years. Generally we have about 2,500 members. Sarah said we have 40,000 individual contacts in our database. Will said that of those 40,000, we generally reach out to 7,500 to 10,000 households asking for support.

Kirsten asked to clarify the difference between the annual fund and member renewals. Sarah said donors receive membership asks yearly and receive up to 3 additional letters, until they renew. Membership letters are sent monthly to reach members 11 months after they last gave. Additionally, most donors receive one annual fund ask a year, either in the Fall or Spring, opposite of when they give their Membership gift.

Seb said it would be helpful to see the number of households we are reaching out to every year, to see if that has any bearing on how many donors we have. Kirsten agreed. She thinks numbers are always easier to understand in context, so it would be great to explain our overall strategy before we dive into the numbers at our April board meeting. Pat said looking at the corporate donors, it would be good to know the percentage of funding we receive from them. Same for foundations or individuals. Will said that information is included in these development metrics.

Sandy asked board members to raise the development questions they asked tonight again at the upcoming board meeting.

House parties discussion – Will Everitt

Will said house parties are a key tool for us to recruit new members and bring back lapsed members. House parties are basically an hour-long cocktail party, followed by a 20 minute presentation about the importance of our work, and then an ask for guests to donate. House Party invitations often include a way to donate, and many people who can not attend donate. When we have a house party, we create a house party committee with the hosts, board members, and staff. Will asked if board members have ideas for hosts or venues for house parties.

Seb said the Diamond Cove development on Great Diamond Island would be a great spot for a house party. They are all right on the Bay and everyone has the means to support us. Seb said that Dick McGonnagal was a developer on that project and that he is a philanthropist. The population at Diamond Cove is a couple hundred residents. Guests who do not live on the island could ride the ferry. Seb said he would approach Dick about this. Sandy said Rick Frantz and Jennifer Fox could be helpful on this, too.

Sandy suggested hosting a house party at Jack Thomas's house. Sandy would be happy to reach out to him. Kirsten said she has two neighbors with great oceanfront houses that she would ask.

Pat asked about the success of our house parties, considering both the funds raised and the ease of planning and coordination. Will said that the most successful house parties have a charismatic host, a great house/venue, and that the host committee brings together the right group of guests. Sarah also said that larger parties can bring in more donations. Will said that having it be a *house* party is important, too. We have hosted these events at yacht clubs in the past, and for some reason the dollar amount of donations is far lower. Will thinks it works well to have a host in their own home tell the guests how much our work matters to them.

Kirsten adjourned the meeting at 6:32 p.m.