An employee from the Coastal Belt Company on Custom House Wharf waits to load barrels of bait onto an incoming lobster boat.
Thanks to Portland, Maine’s booming creative economy, development in this peninsula city is occurring at a staggering speed – now more than ever. But as new non-marine businesses, condos, and hotels are all trying to grab a piece of prime real estate near the water, could Portland, in the process, lose a cherished cultural tradition: its working waterfront? A diverse cross-section of fishermen, city officials, Portland citizens, and Commercial Street merchants are standing up and digging in their heels.
I can see my breath as I dodge the shadows on the old brick sidewalk on my morning walk along Portland’s waterfront, home to a dozen wharves jutting into Casco Bay from the south side of Commercial Street. The smell of the salty sea mixed with diesel draws me toward the clanging of lobster traps being loaded on boats and engines sputtering to life on this cool October morning. While the tourists remain snug in their warm beds, Portland’s fishermen, lobstermen, and bait dealers have already begun their day.

Fishing is the oldest industry in the United States and the lifeblood of many coastal communities in Maine. Generations of Mainers like Steve Train have grown up on the waters surrounding Portland. “My grandfather was a lobsterman. I grew up building lobster boats out of Legos. It’s in my blood,” says Train. “Every dollar I have made since high school has come from the ocean.” For the past four decades, Train has hauled 800 traps in Casco Bay year-round on his 46-foot Jarvis Newman lobster boat, named Hattie Rose after his two daughters.

But what Portland is best known for is evolving. Once a gritty working-class city, in the last five to ten years, Portland has become a hotbed for restaurants, craft breweries, entrepreneurs, and more. In 2018, Bon Appétit named Portland the “Restaurant City of the Year” beating out cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and New York. You’ll find the most breweries per capita here, with 18 breweries per 50,000 people. The downtown district boasts a vibrant, thriving contemporary art scene, offering everything from independent art spaces and artist-run cooperatives promoting homegrown talent to art museums attracting big names to the city. The list of creative outlets goes on.

With all the recent accolades and attention, the city has naturally seen an influx of new residents, tourists, and economic development. New office buildings, luxury condos, and hotels are being built all across the city to meet the increasing demand. While the new development is generally seen as positive, many long-time residents are concerned for the future of Portland’s working waterfront, where some of the city’s most valuable real estate – with downtown proximity and stunning harborfront views – has been set aside for low-rent marine industries like

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boat repair, fishing, and seafood processing. But as it becomes crowded by more and more high-end housing and the influx of new non-marine businesses, fishermen fear the loss of not just their workspace, but of affordable berths for working vessels, and affordable workspace and warehouses for the businesses that support them. So what is being done to ensure that this ocean economy stays afloat? And is it enough?

As the sun begins to rise over the ocean, I start to see where the old meets the new along the waterfront. As I approach Hobson’s Wharf, wedged between the West End and Old Port, I can see the skeleton of a new hotel being built on the former Rufus Deering Lumber Company site. My destination is just across the street: Becky’s Diner, a no-nonsense American diner that has been a community staple since 1991. Opening at 4 a.m., the restaurant provides homestyle cooking at affordable prices.

As I settle into a red booth for my breakfast of eggs and bacon, I’m surrounded by local fishermen and lobstermen, many perched at the counter, stooped over their coffee and swapping stories before they put on their rubber boots and head out onto Casco Bay for the day.

The fishing community in Maine, especially Portland, is unique. “Maine is a fleet of small boats,” says Ben Martens, the executive director of Maine Coast Fishermen’s Association. “In a lot of places across the country, the boats are bigger and spend more time out to sea. They only need one or two ports to offload their hauls. Maine is different. We have more fishing trips that take place than any state other than Alaska. Our fishermen need more space to offload their catch.”

A stroll along the historic Widgery Wharf with its colorful fish houses and stacks of lobster traps demonstrates just how much space fishermen and lobstermen need to run their businesses. “Not only do we need access to the water for our boat, but we also need room to dry our traps and rig buoys,” says Katie Werner, owner of Island Lobster Company on Peaks Island. “It’s important that my husband [who fishes off of Merrill’s Wharf] continues to have access to bait dealers and a marina to pull his boat out for repairs.”

While the encroachment issue has been thrust into the limelight now, it’s actually nothing new. What is new, however, is that the city is now paying close attention. “Development issues on the waterfront have ebbed and flowed since the 1980s,” says Bill Needelman, the City of Portland’s waterfront coordinator and a third-generation Portlander. In November 2018, dozens of fishermen, merchants, and artists gathered at Andy’s Old Port Pub
to collect signatures on a petition to restore a water-dependency use requirement in zoning along the city’s working waterfront in response to proposed hotel and parking garage projects along the waterfront. The city got the message and created the Waterfront Working Group, made up of Portland’s citizens, fishermen, and Commercial Street merchants.

“Our current city manager [Jon Jennings] has been very proactive and created the Waterfront Working Group to ensure the voices of our local fishermen, lobstermen, and wharf owners are heard,” says Needelman. “For the past year, we have been working on new zoning policies, and we’ll continue to work with the group on other marine-related issues.”

Non-marine development isn’t the only issue affecting local fishermen. Climate change and sediment buildup has limited the use of several of the piers in the city. The city has lost about a quarter of its berthing capacity due to sedimentation, which inhibits herring boats and other larger fishing vessels’ access to the wharves to unload their catch. The City of Portland is now working with the state and federal governments along with local fishermen and wharf owners to begin dredging with the Army Corps of Engineers to ensure commercial boats can continue to access the wharves.

Despite a coastline that extends over 5,300 miles, working waterfronts account for only 20 miles in Maine. For commercial fishing, the number is even lower. Portland’s waterfront has been the center for fishing, shipping, and commerce for more than 350 years. While Portland’s seaport is small compared to other cities, it is the largest tonnage seaport in New England – and, despite what you might think, it is growing.

“Portland’s creative economy has experienced a lot of growth, but so has our waterfront in the past 10 years,” says Portland’s Economic Development Director, Greg Mitchell. This is particularly in reference to the revitalized shipping industry that is having a huge positive effect on the lobstermen and
fishermen. Eimskip, a 100-year-old Icelandic transportation company with connections across northern Europe and Scandinavia, moved its United States headquarters to Portland in 2013. Portland is its only port in the US. "Once viewed as the end of the road, Portland is now the middle of the world," says Mitchell. "Eimskip allows us to ship more Maine products like lobster, seafood, blueberries, and more to over 350 million people across the Atlantic Ocean." Isafjord, a newly established subsidiary of North Atlantic Cargo Line, a family-owned international shipping and forwarding company, also relocated to Portland in early 2020.

"Portland is home to 12 wharves. Last year, between the herring boats that docked on the wharves and the herring that was shipped in from Eimskip, the city saw roughly $500 million in herring, which is used as lobster bait across the state. The 100 lobster boats in Portland brought in another $75 million," says Willis Spear Jr., a ground fisherman and lobsterman and Waterfront Working Group member. "That's a lot of money to be pushed over the wharves for non-marine use."

As I meander my way north along Commercial Street from Beale's Diner, I step back in time. Commercial Street was built on filled land and old piers during the 1850s for fishermen to store and transport their products via the Grand Trunk Railway and Portland Terminal Co. Railway. During the 1970s and 1980s, many properties on the waterfront here were sold for non-marine development, including the building of several large condo projects on Chandler's Wharf right in the Old Port. But again, it seems the city is happy to hear out those water-dependent businesses. In 1987, led by local fishermen, Portland voters halted all non-marine development along Commercial Street and its wharfs. It happened again in 2010.

Along the waterfront, it's easy to see that fishing is a way of life for many Mainers. Trucks filled with bright yellow and blue lobster traps are parked along the wharves while men wearing their trademark rubber boats, orange Grundens, and well-loved baseball caps are carrying them down to the docks to load onto their boats. Boats bearing names like Mistress and Nancy J are piled high with buoys, ropes, and bait waiting to head out onto the water for the day.

"Tourists come to Portland to experience an authentic working waterfront. People want to eat lobster rolls while looking out the window at the lobsterman unloading his traps. Our waterfront is what distinguishes us from other coastal towns on the East Coast. We don't look or smell the same," says Needelman. Not to mention, Portland's acclaimed restaurant scene would not be what it is today without its fishermen. Many of the restaurants like Island Lobster Company and Luke's Lobster purchase lobsters right off the docks from the local lobstermen.

"I've been all over the world, and there's no place like Portland. It's one of the only continuously operating working waterfronts in America. You can go from eating at a five-star restaurant to seeing someone working on the waterfront within a matter of feet," says Spear Jr. "You can't put a price tag on that."