

*The weekly interview*

# Michael McGovern: Cape Elizabeth Town Manager

*"When I came here Fort Williams was a bunch of dilapidated buildings. Fort Williams wasn't a park then."*

By **Jim Keithley**  
staff

Michael McGovern was two days out of college when he took a job as administrative assistant in Cape Elizabeth.

"I graduated from UMO on Saturday, May 20 and started working in Cape Elizabeth on the following Monday," McGovern said from his office at town hall.

McGovern had spent the summer of 1977 interning for the town. Later that year, Council Chair Henry Adams would call Memorial Union at the University of Maine to track down the intern who did such an admirable job.

Adams hired McGovern over the phone, for what was supposed to be a temporary job. McGovern was hired to assist Herb Dennison, then director of Public Works, who found himself temporarily in the town manager's position. When the new town manager, John Henchey, was hired three months later, McGovern was asked to stay on.

"We hit it off," McGovern said of his former boss.

"I was making \$225 a week and thought I was in the money," he said.

McGovern grew up in Portland and graduated from Deering High School in 1974. He majored in public management at UMaine.

For the next eight years, McGovern would work under John Henchey.

"He was great to work with," McGovern said. "He was a wonderful man. He picked his battles very well."

It would prove to be the most important lesson learned, if you are to succeed as town manager in a place like Cape Elizabeth.

"He made all the decisions, but I did a lot of the background work."

McGovern's work did not go unnoticed. When Henchey retired in 1985, the town did not have to look very far for a replacement. McGovern was hired again, on the spot.

McGovern was 29 years old when he was hired as the town manager of Cape Elizabeth.

A quarter of a century later, McGovern said he has the best job in the world.

"I think it's one of the best municipal jobs in the state of Maine."

It has not always been easy, he said. There is always an issue or a challenge.

McGovern remembers one of the early issues in his career.

"We had a huge controversy over sewers," he said. "Hundreds of people turned out for the meetings."

"My challenge was to take an issue where the community was divided and bring together that community," McGovern said.

There have been other projects.

Back in 2000, the town approved a plan to build a new police department, public works garage and community center.

McGovern credits the town's success to a willingness to work together.

"The great thing about Cape Elizabeth is every project is a collaborative effort. That's why we tend to get things done."

"The elected officials and staff all get along with each other," he said. "That isn't always the case."

Cape officials have taken a stand to fight against fast development and growth.

"Cape Elizabeth sought to hold down its growth," McGovern said.

"The town itself has bought or acquired over 1,000 acres either through donations or purchases."

For example, you won't find a McDonald's or Dunkin' Donuts here.

"We don't allow drive-throughs," McGovern said.

Slowing growth and preserving open space and wetlands are the key to Cape's success, McGovern said.

McGovern said he is pleased to have played a small role in the success of Fort Williams Park.

"When I came here Fort Williams was a bunch of dilapidated buildings. Fort Williams wasn't a park then," he said.

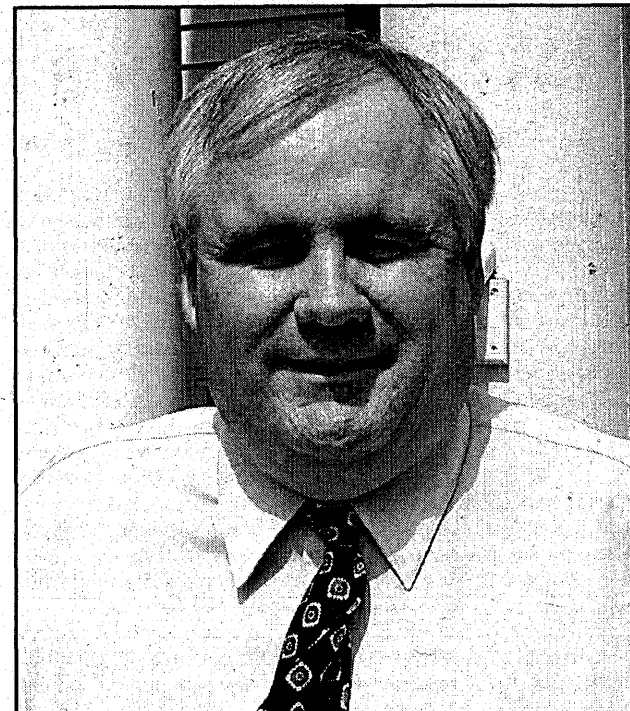
It took years to develop that spectacular spot on the ocean into what it is today, a place where a million visitors per year come to see Portland Headlight.

"We didn't try to do it over night."

The Portland Headlight is another interesting story on McGovern's resume.

In the early 1990s the U.S. Coast Guard owned the world-famous lighthouse. The Coast Guard had decided to automate the lighthouse.

"We told the Coast Guard we'd like to own the lighthouse," McGovern said.



**MICHAEL MCGOVERN**

of Cape Elizabeth at no cost."

And so began the slow process of turning Fort Williams into the world-renowned park that it is today.

McGovern is a quiet, friendly guy who is well liked in the community he has served for a quarter of a century.

During a recent council meeting McGovern was honored for his years of service.

Janet McLaughlin, one of Cape Elizabeth's state representatives and herself a former councilor, presented a Legislative Sentiment recognizing McGovern for his 25 years of service. During that time, the document read, McGovern has been manager of the year; been president of the Maine Town and City Management Association and the Maine Municipal Association; served on various state, local and regional task forces, planning committees and boards; and served with the Red Cross, United Way, South Portland-Cape Elizabeth Chamber of Commerce and South Portland-Cape Elizabeth Rotary.

Asked what he does for fun, McGovern answered, "I spend an awful lot of time with Rotary."

He travels the world conducting training seminars for Rotarians.

McGovern just returned from Australia from one such seminar.

During that same recent council meeting, McGovern was greeted with a standing ovation. Councilor Jack Roberts presented McGovern with the customary chair emblazoned with the town seal. His name was engraved on the back.

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“They told us it would take an act of Congress.”

“We said, ‘fine that’s what we’ll do,’ and we went to George Mitchell.

Mitchell, who was a U.S. Senator and majority leader at the time, submitted a bill and it was passed. The bill read; “The Portland Headlight shall be transferred to the town

McGovern had just spent 45 hours on a plane home from Australia and probably would have rather taken a nap in that chair. But, like the professional he is, sat through another town council meeting.

At 47, McGovern has no plans to retire.

“I’m not in the retirement system,” he said.