

Interview with Charles on May 14th, 2009, in Atlantic, North Carolina. Charles is a real estate developer.

Q.1. Connection to Down East

Linda

How long have you been living Down East?

Charles

I've been living here for about six years.

Linda

So what attracted you to come here as opposed to the other places you could've picked?

Charles

I've lived all over the country over the years, but I missed the salt water. And I've been in other places where I haven't been in that salt water but for some reason there was just this very strong urge. I had friends who lived in Harkers Island and went to visit them. First thing I did, I didn't go in and say hello, I just walked straight and walked right out in the water and just stood for a little while. And while I was home as part of that business trip, about three weeks into that trip I got up one morning and real early, and drove down to Marshallberg and got here and spent the day from Marshallberg heading east just taking notes on what was on the market, just looking. And so I spent the first day just doing some research and the next day I ended up buying this house.

Linda

So what makes Down East unique?

Charles

The people make it special. Most of the folks here are native people, you know and they tolerate the dingbatters like me. It's the fact that commercial fishermen make up the fiber and the backbone of this community. It's the fact that you have little bungalows like this instead of the McMansions that we find mandated, practically, over on the beach. So it's still, it's a sense of community. You know, we got a school right down the road. The kids, you know they're my neighbors, they come down and play on my critters in the yard, come see the peacocks. And you know, I mean I get that kind of quality of life.

Linda

So what do you like doing while you're here? I mean you go out on your boat. Do you fish?

Charles

Oh yeah, I've, you know when I moved down here, living right at the harbor was just purely coincidental. But I wandered down to the docks early on and spoke to some of the guys who owned boats down here and said by the way, back in the early '70s I was living on the coast of South Carolina and I was working on a shrimp boat for a while. So I had some experience. If you guys ever need a hand, I'd love to jump on board with you. Well you know after I – my initial opportunity to do that, I think that the scuttlebutt around town was that dingbatter knows what he's doing and he's a good worker and he works cheap. So I've been able to get to know these guys down here and I've been able to virtually go on any kind of fishing trip that goes on down here. And so I've been exposed to all the different kinds of commercial fishing that these guys use.

One of the beautiful things about living down here is how supportive everybody is of one another. You know, somebody's boat breaks down, everybody comes to help. Somebody's boat sinks; everybody drops what they're doing to come help. Somebody's sick and can't get out, these guys drop by fish every day. Most of the time they'll clean it. Take it; all you gotta do is cook it.

And that's the kind of supportive environment that exists and I think it – because of everybody looking out for one another on the water and that continues once they get on land. If you need something, if your house needs repair, it's not hard to find people who are willing to come jump in. They don't want any pay. We'll help you. It's a wonderful thing. Will the young kids continue to do that? I don't know, time will tell.

Q.2. Connection to Down East natural environment

Linda

What do you value about the environment Down East?

Charles

It's the pristineness of the water quality here. We're still dealing with Outstanding Resource Water here.

Q.3. Professional perspective on Down East

Linda

What is your perspective on Down East as someone who's lived here for six years but knows the coast, and is a developer?

Charles

I think from my background as a developer – I was also a general contractor for many years and I've been a real estate broker for a long time. And I've also lived all over the country and so I've been exposed to a lot of different environments. I know what impact development has on communities. And it's not necessarily all negative but unfortunately the model that we in North Carolina have chosen to use is the outdated same old way of doing business that everybody does, which is build it today and we'll deal with the problems later. And the problems never go away.

You never have the money after the fact to deal with the problems. And so you're always coming from a place of trying to catch up and the impacts are so enormous, taken as a whole that it's virtually impossible to do it, because the only way to do it is to raise taxes because that's the only way you can fund things anymore. And there's nobody who wants to show the leadership that's required and have the backing that's required to say okay, we've got to do this. Looking for future generations cause we're gonna end up, the Core Sound right there is gonna end up just like the Chesapeake Bay at some point if we don't change this model that we continue to use as far as developing is concerned.

Q.4. Community and environmental change

Linda

So you mentioned fishing and what do you think about the fisheries here? What kind of state are they in, what's their future, what's their – what's the trajectory here for fisheries?

Charles

Well, your first question is what shape they're in and that's not good. And I don't think anybody knows really the reason why. I think it's a number of factors, probably the fish go in cycles and sometimes there's an abundance of fish and we're unfortunately in a downturn. Now is that just because it's a cyclical thing of nature? Or do we have – I mean we got the Neuse River right here behind us which is the cesspool for Raleigh and Durham and Kinston and all these other communities that use that to dump their waste. You know, what effect does that have on the fish population?

You know you got the Pamlico River which is not quite as impacted because there's not the size communities that are on it but it's gotta have some effect. But clearly the fisheries is in bad shape now. The price of fuel is high, although not as high as it was last year thankfully, but these guys are getting paid the equivalent of what they were making 30 years ago and I don't know many people who could go back 30 years and have that as a wage and survive in today's economy.

Linda

So do you think there's hope or there's a future for fisheries –

Charles

Well, there's a group of men who are in their 50s and 60s who are still fishing. There's a group of kids who are in their late teens, early 20s who are fishing. There's not much in between. And there are not many of younger kids here, maybe a dozen at most just in Atlantic.

Linda

*Talk about the change you've seen Down East, even in the short time that you've been here.
Have you seen a lot of change in that six year window?*

Charles

Well that's what, that's what got me off the couch so to speak was the threat of the coming development. And what has always protected Down East has been the fact that the soil down here is so bad or that the water table is so high that you couldn't ever get it to perk. So you couldn't put a septic tank in. Well, the state and particularly the county government has endorsed the notion of private-package treatment plans. And so if you have a large enough property where you can get the density, that you could make the numbers work to go out and purchase one of these private package treatment plants to treat the sewage – that changed the ballgame cause all of a sudden you didn't need septic tanks. You could put a sewer plant in, treat it and then all you gotta do is dispose of the "clean water". So all of a sudden here's this tract, it's unzoned virtually, the entire part, all of Down East is unzoned. Now you advertise in home builder magazines "waterfront property, no zoning" and see what happens. And this was back six years ago.

Linda

Do you think, so has there been any positive changes over the six years, things that you think have been positive outcomes or good things that have happened Down East?

Charles

Well it think people's awareness has improved. I don't think that the folks down here realize, because they've been so isolated for so long, is that when change comes you lose control. And I don't think they fully comprehend the impact that all this development is gonna have. And I'm talking mainly about quality of life 'cause you know, it's as good as it gets down here right now and it has been for the last six years but we're served with a two-lane highway and that's all it's ever gonna be.

Q.5. Vision for the future of Down East

Linda

With so many outsiders moving in, how is Down East going to change?

Charles

Well you know, for me being a North Carolina native and knowing the coast as well as I do, you know I've been around boats, I know the terminology, I know the – I used to bring my kids down here when they were infants, you know and we were all over the coast. And so I could talk about the places these guys have fished because I've been there and they go, "Whoa, he understands, he's been around, he knows what he's talking about." People who are moving in who don't have that kind of background that I do, you know once again, we don't know what that's gonna be like but certainly it's not gonna be the same. It's not to say it's not gonna be a nice place to live anymore but it'll be a different sort of way to relate to those who are native.

Linda

What would be your vision for the future of Down East?

Charles

I mean I've got my own ideas, but what I would truly love is for the county commissioners to fund a planning study where all 13 villages of Down East would be at the table with a professional planner and look at what's existing today. And the available land that's developable, whether it's commercial, industrial or residential and I think we need all three of those to be a component of what Down East looks like, and then make a decision both individually as one of 13 villages as well as collectively as to what we want Down East to look like. And we could have it. We could have it.

We've got a jewel here. It's like no other place on the coast of North Carolina. We could make Carteret County world famous by taking these 13 villages and creating something so special that everybody would come and say wow, we need to see what they did and how they did it because they managed to save what's there, preserve what's there as well as get ready for the future and accommodate the future.

Q.6. Barriers to and opportunities for achieving your vision

Linda

What opportunities for or barriers to achieving this vision do you see?

Charles

It's not only the planning process that's a part of that. It is the acknowledgement and willingness of the county commissioners to buy into that process.