

SECTION 3

Community Profile

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3 Community Profile

A brief community profile has been included in this Section which is augmented by community asset information in **Section 4** and the community capability assessment in **Section 5**. The planning area addressed in this Plan includes all lands within the geographical boundaries of the Town of New Shoreham, Rhode Island which encompasses the entirety of Block Island.

3.1 WELCOME TO NEW SHOREHAM

New Shoreham, located in Washington County, Rhode Island, is coterminous (has the same boundaries) with Block Island. The island is less than ten square-miles and roughly twelve miles off the coast of Rhode Island (Town of New Shoreham RI. *Comprehensive*, 1-2). It is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the south, east, and west, and Block Island Sound separates it from mainland of Rhode Island to the north. Based on the 2020 census, New Shoreham is home to just over 1,400 people, but as a tourist destination the summer population can increase tenfold. During the summer months, particularly between July and Labor Day, the number of people in New Shoreham (Block Island) can swell to 20,000 visitors per day, which includes both overnight guests and day-trippers, significantly increasing the island's population from its year-round resident count (Wargo, 6).

Until European settlers re-named it after Dutch explorer Adrian Block, the island was referred to as Manissess (the Little God's Island) by the Narragansett Indians, and was used seasonally as hunting and fishing grounds by members of the Narragansett, Wampanoag, Niantic, and Pequot peoples (URI. *Manissean*). The island came under European rule as a colony of Massachusetts, settled by sixteen families in 1661, and became a colony of Rhode Island several years later, in 1664. It was incorporated in 1672 and named for Shoreham in Sussex County, England (Town of New Shoreham RI. *Comprehensive*, 2-2).

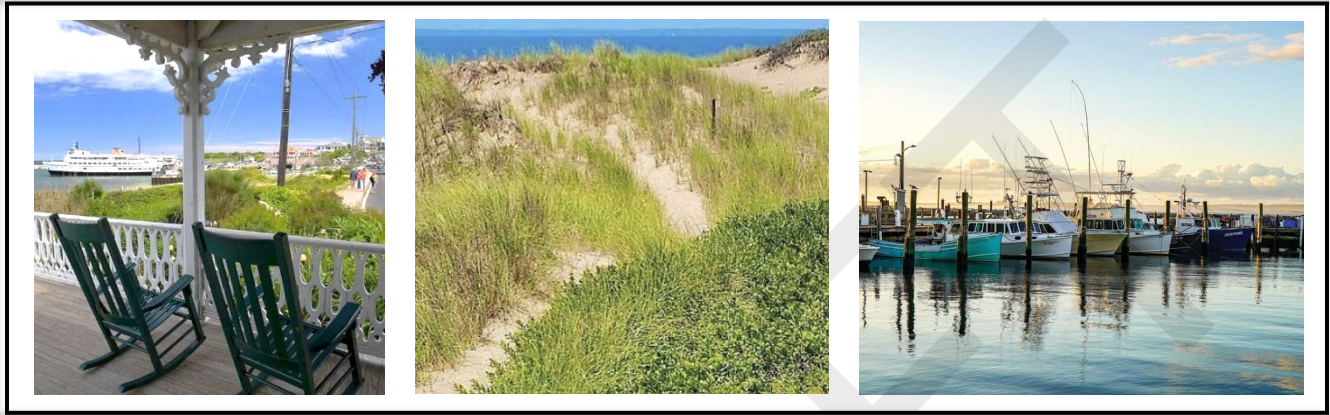
In part due to its remote location, but perhaps more by choice, New Shoreham has remained relatively rural with, according to the Block Island Land Trust, an estimated 46.1% of the island allocated as conserved open space. Even within the settled regions of the island, the majority of the roads remain unpaved and many of the staples of commercialized life (supermarkets and big-box retail stores, franchise restaurants, and high-rise hotels) are nowhere to be found.



The most commercialized area of New Shoreham is in the vicinity around and between Old and New Harbors. This area is serviced by public water and sewer, and small retail and other businesses are intermixed with residential housing. Much of the commercialization is tourism-driven businesses, restaurants, and accommodations which cater to the seasonal influx of visitors while maintaining the island's overall charm and natural beauty.

Outside of the more built-up areas are zones dominated by single-family homes, along with some low-impact service establishments and smaller inns and B&B's. The remainder of the island is dominated by openness, interspersed by low density residential uses, and with compatible economic activities including agriculture and home occupations. Of necessity, certain public/quasi-public facilities, including the State Airport, Transfer Station, and Block Island Water Company treatment facility, are located in the more rural areas. However, by-and-far the predominant characteristic of New Shoreham's rural area is its undeveloped natural landscapes and scenic beauty.

Figure 3-2 New Shoreham (Block Island) Photo Credit: Block Island Tourism Council



Within New Shoreham lie historic homesteads, cemeteries, stone walls, and various sites of archaeological significance. The island's cultural and historic resources are treasured by residents and tourist alike. In the Old Harbor Historic District, residents and visitors can admire Victorian buildings as they stroll back in time through the late 19th century. The island's two lighthouses are, similarly, points of Town pride and attract thousands of visitors each year. There are quite a few properties and areas within the Town that have the qualities necessary for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The Town boasts seven historic sites on the National Register: Block Island North Light (Sandy Point); Block Island Southeast Light (Southeast Light Road); Great Salt Pond Archeological District; Hygeia House (Beach Avenue); Old Harbor Historic District; Peleg Champlin House (Rodman Pond Lane); and the U.S. Weather Bureau Station (Beach Avenue) (RIHPHC).



While the Town's inland and coastal water features are integral to the character of New Shoreham, and embraced by residents and visitors, the low-lying lands are vulnerable to flooding, coastal erosion, sea level rise, and wind damage. While risks from these hazards are not new, the intensity and frequency of occurrence due to climate change, exacerbates resiliency concerns. To ensure public health and safety and environmental resiliency, the Town needs to continue to balance development (especially in areas with higher risks to natural hazards) with the active protection of the Town's natural resources. In addition, to the extent possible the Town needs to implement natural hazard mitigation strategies, such as those identified in **Section 6**.

Figure 3-3 Damage to Corn Neck Road from Superstorm Sandy (2012)

Photo Credit: Corn Neck Road Transportation Resiliency Planning Study

3.2 GOVERNMENT

The State of Rhode Island has 39 municipalities which are grouped into 5 counties. The Town of New Shoreham is part of Washington County along with Charlestown, Exeter, Hopkinton, Narragansett, North Kingstown, Richmond, South Kingstown, and Westerly. While neighboring communities work cooperatively with one another, Rhode Island counties do not have governmental structure. Instead, local governance is provided by each of the eight cities and thirty-one towns.

3.2.1 Municipal Government

The Town of New Shoreham operates under a Home Rule Charter, ratified by the Rhode Island General Assembly on October 30, 1672. The Charter provides the overall structure of the government, including the form of government which is Town Council-Town Manager (RIDMF. *Municipal*, 47). Per State law, once a local government is established, it is in the position to create municipal code for the community's governance. Municipal code refers to the collection of local laws (also known as ordinances, bylaws, measures, regulations, etc.) that are passed by a local governing body. As long as a community's laws do not conflict with the laws of the State, they carry the full force and effect of law (Library of Congress. Intro).

New Shoreham's five member Town Council (First Warden, Second Warden and three Town Councilors) is elected for two-year terms at the regular biennial elections, with the First Warden functioning as the Chief Executive Officer. In general, the Town Council is responsible for enacting local legislation; making decisions related to the Town's property, affairs, and government; setting the budget for the municipal side; and appointing a Town Manager who functions as the Town's Chief Administrative Officer. The Town Manager is responsible for carrying out the policies of the Town Council, and with the exception of the School Department, appointing all department heads and overseeing the day-to-day operation of Town Departments and services (RIDMF. *Municipal*, 47, 48).

The Town provides a range of municipal services including public safety protection; economic and development services; maintenance and management of Town-owned buildings, roads, and other infrastructure; harbor management; recreational activities; on-site wastewater management; and other administrative services. The Town owns the solid waste transfer station, but contracts with a private company for its operation and management. The water and sewer utilities, which are limited to the vicinity in and around Old Harbor and New Harbor are quasi-municipal with each having a Commission to oversee the companies' operations and maintenance.

Figure 3-4 Town Hall Photo Credit: Town of New Shoreham



Town employees, across all departments, work hard to meet the needs of the community and to maintain a quality of life that residents have come to expect. As municipal staffing is limited, the Town relies on active volunteer boards to assist in meeting the community’s current and future needs. An overview of the key Town departments and boards/commissions engaged in hazard mitigation is provided in **Appendix 5-2**. The volunteer participation on the Town’s numerous boards and commissions speaks to the community’s pride in its heritage and aspiration for the future. A list of current Town Boards, Commissions, and Committees is provided below. Notification of board meetings are posted on the Town Website Calendar.

Town Boards, Commissions, and Committees

- ◇ Block Island Early Learning Center Board of Directors
- ◇ Block Island Housing Board
- ◇ Block Island Land Trust
- ◇ Block Island Volunteer Fire & Rescue
- ◇ Board of Assessment Review
- ◇ Board of Assessors
- ◇ Board of Canvassers
- ◇ Coastal Resilience Committee
- ◇ Commission of Motor Vehicles for Hire
- ◇ Conservation Commission
- ◇ Emergency Management Task Force
- ◇ Harbors Committee
- ◇ Health Services Board of Directors
- ◇ Historic District Commission
- ◇ Library Board of Trustees
- ◇ New Shoreham Tourism Council
- ◇ North Light Commission
- ◇ Old Harbor Task Force
- ◇ Planning Board
- ◇ Police Advisory Commission
- ◇ Recreation Board
- ◇ School Committee
- ◇ Senior Advisory Committee
- ◇ Sewer District Committee
- ◇ Shellfish Commission
- ◇ Water District Commission
- ◇ Zoning Board of Review
- ◇ Zoning Official

3.2.2 School Department

The mission of the Block Island Public School is for their students to “graduate with the knowledge, experiences, and character for success in life and the challenges of tomorrow” (Block Island School).

The Block Island Public school, located at 15 High Street, is the only public school within New Shoreham and serves Kindergarten through twelfth grade students. The school was constructed in 1933 and replaced the five one-room schools that previously served the Town’s youth. The school was expanded in 2006 to add a cafeteria, library, gym, and high school classrooms. The 2024-2025 school year has 125 students enrolled (generally less than 10 students per grade), and they enjoy a student-teacher ratio of 6:1, which is roughly half the state average of 13:1 (Public School Review).



Figure 3-5 Block Island School
Photo Credit: Block Island School Facebook

The New Shoreham School Committee is composed of five members of the community who are elected at large for staggered four-year terms at the regular biennial elections. Committee meetings are open to the public and generally take place on the third Monday of the month at 7pm. The School Committee is responsible for the overall governance of the School District. They determine and control all policies, appoint a Superintendent as the District’s Chief Administrative Agent, and review and approve the annual school budget.

3.2.3 Budget

The annual Town budget runs from July 1 to June 30, and serves as the foundation for financial planning and control. Entities under the jurisdiction of the Town Council, including Town officials, departments, boards, and committees, need to submit budget requests for the ensuing fiscal year to the Town Manager prior to the first Monday in February. This information is then organized by the Town Clerk and submitted to the Town Council by the third Monday of March. Based on the submitted requests, the Town Council with assistance from the Town Manager will assemble a preliminary recommended budget, with input from the sponsor of each appropriation request. The Town Council will hold at least two Public Hearings (generally at the beginning of April) on its preliminary recommended budget. After changes (if any) to the preliminary budget based on Public Hearing input, the Town Council will finalize their recommended Operating and Capital Budget. In order for the community to be better informed at the Financial Town Meeting, the budget materials are made available on the Town's website and at Town Hall. All registered voters in Town may vote on the proposed annual budget at the Financial Town Meeting which is held the first Monday in May.

Maintaining a resilient local economy is important to enable providing high quality municipal services, including protecting against natural hazard risks. The Town's total operating budget for FY2025 (July 1, 2024-June 30, 2025) was \$19,286,912, of which \$13,608,007 was attributed to the municipal side and \$5,678,905 to the School District (Town of New Shoreham RI. *FY2025*, 1). As part of the budget process, each year the Town adopts a 6-year Capital Improvement Program identifying projects that should be undertaken during the upcoming 6 years. This long-range planning process is essential in addressing the future development and growth of the Town. The Town strives to balance pay as you go funding with borrowing for capital requirements, using long term financing for long-lived assets with broad community value.

3.3 GEOGRAPHY

New Shoreham is an island community roughly twelve miles from the nearest mainland (Town of New Shoreham RI. *Comprehensive*, 1-2). The island is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the south, east, and west, and Block Island Sound separates it from mainland Rhode Island to the north. According to the Block Island Land Trust, as of September 2024, preserved open space on Block Island totaled 2,829 acres, or 46.1% of the island's 6,076 acres. Of that, 371 acres (6%) is unprotected undevelopable open water and wetlands. "The island is approximately seven miles from the northern sandy tip to the high southern bluff wall, and three and a half miles at its widest point east to west. The island narrows to less than 1/10th of a mile at a north-south midpoint, referred to as the 'neck' with the Atlantic Ocean to the east, and the Great Salt Pond to the west" (Town of New Shoreham RI. *BI Hazard*, 6).

Access to the island is through personal or commercial boat or air services. The island's "coastal bluffs present obstacles to shoreline approach... Dock locations are limited to Old Harbor on the eastern shore and New Harbor to the west" (Town of New Shoreham RI. *BI Hazard*, 6). Ferry and air service to/from New Shoreham is recognized as a critical lifeline for the community and is available on a year round basis. Mainland ferry ports include Point Judith and Newport, RI, and seasonally from New London, CT and Montauk, NY. New England Airlines provides scheduled air transport service year-round between Block Island State Airport and Westerly State Airport, as well as charter service to and from other airports in the region.



Figure 3-6 Block Island Ferry

Photo Credit: Block Island Tourism Council

New Shoreham's character is intertwined with the island's abundance of freshwater and saltwater resources. There are numerous beautiful beaches with varying features such as calm waters, dune systems, and rugged shorelines. Along much of the shoreline are coastal wetlands and salt marshes. The western side of the island features the Great Salt Pond, a saltwater lagoon, that serves as both a harbor and a recreational area. Brooks and streams meander the landscape and feed the hundreds of freshwater ponds and wetlands scattered across the island. The freshwater resources assist in stormwater filtration and groundwater recharge. Block Island is considered a single continuous sole source aquifer which means the island's groundwater system is the primary and only practical source of potable water for the entire island. In addition to providing scenic beauty, these freshwater and saltwater resources help sustain life; control flooding, erosion, and pollution; sustain ecological systems and provide valuable fish, plant, and wildlife habitats; provide irrigation for agriculture; and offer year-round active and passive recreation.

Other natural features that define the island include numerous terrestrial areas that are ecologically significant, such as Block Island National Wildlife Refuge and Rodman's Hollow. The inland areas of Block Island are dotted with rolling hills, meadows, and wooded patches, providing a mix of open spaces and forested environments. There is also some agricultural land supporting small farms, gardens, and open fields, many of which are lined with stone walls that contribute to the island's rural character. Along portions of the island's perimeter are rugged bluffs, including the iconic Mohegan Bluffs on the island's southern coast. The island sports an extensive trail system with those along the bluffs offering some of the island's most breathtaking panoramic views.

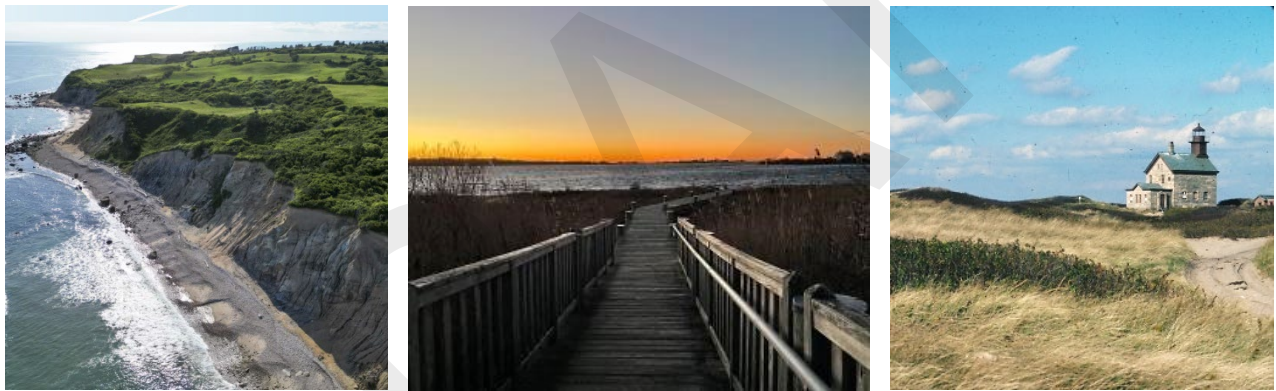


Figure 3-7 Scenic Views of New Shoreham

Photo Credit: Block Island Tourism Council (left & middle); USFWS - Block Island National Wildlife Refuge (right)

3.4 POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

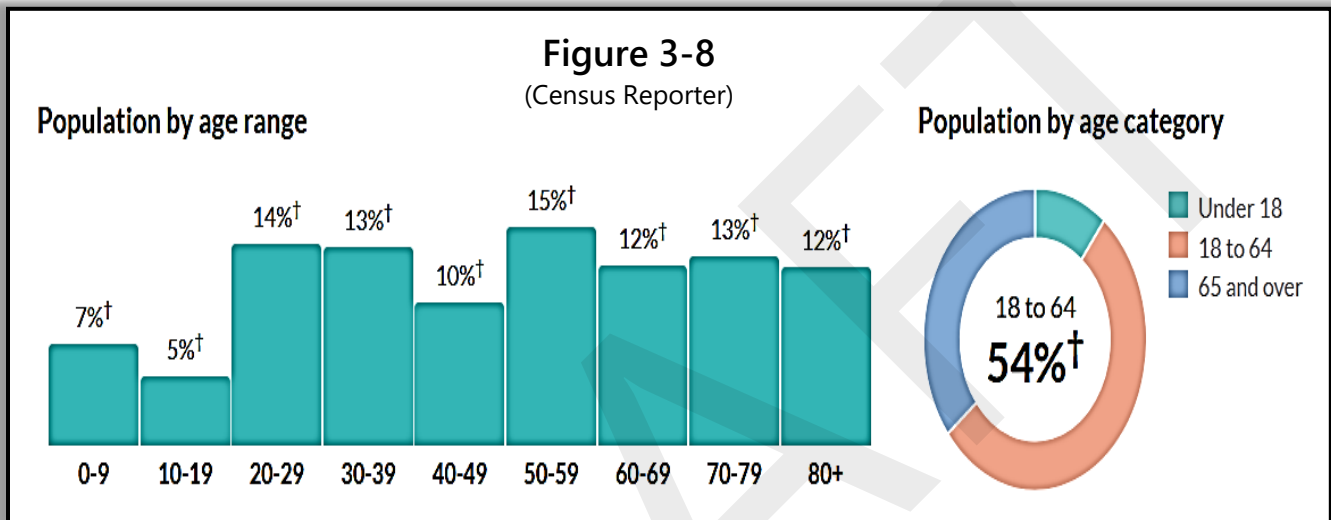
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, New Shoreham had a population of 1,051 in 2010 which grew to 1,410 in 2020 (a 34.2% increase, corresponding to 359 people). However, the Town's annual Groundhog Day's census, taken February 2, 2021 and considered more accurate by many locals, reported only 1,094 residents (Shorey).

It should be noted that for small communities, such as New Shoreham, the census data and correspondingly the 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) data has large margins of error for certain data points due to its smaller population size. The margins of error for an island community with many residents spending part of the year off-island increases the error potential. This means that while the census data presented in this section provides a general insight into the community, the data should be interpreted with caution.

The American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates (2019-2023) indicate that the population of New Shoreham is nearly equal between females (51.0%) and males (49.0%). The median age for New Shoreham is 51.1, with 11.6% age 19 or younger, 37.0% age 60 or older, and 35.7% age 65 or older. Comparatively, the population of those 65 or older in Washington County is 24.2% (US Census Bureau. *New*, Population), and for the State of Rhode Island is 18.3% (US Census Bureau. *Rhode*, Population).

New Shoreham has one of the highest percentages of senior residents (over the age of 65) in Rhode Island.

As such, the Advisory Committee made the effort to include in the planning process various community lifelines that service the senior population and also modified several of the outreach activities to better accommodate the senior population.



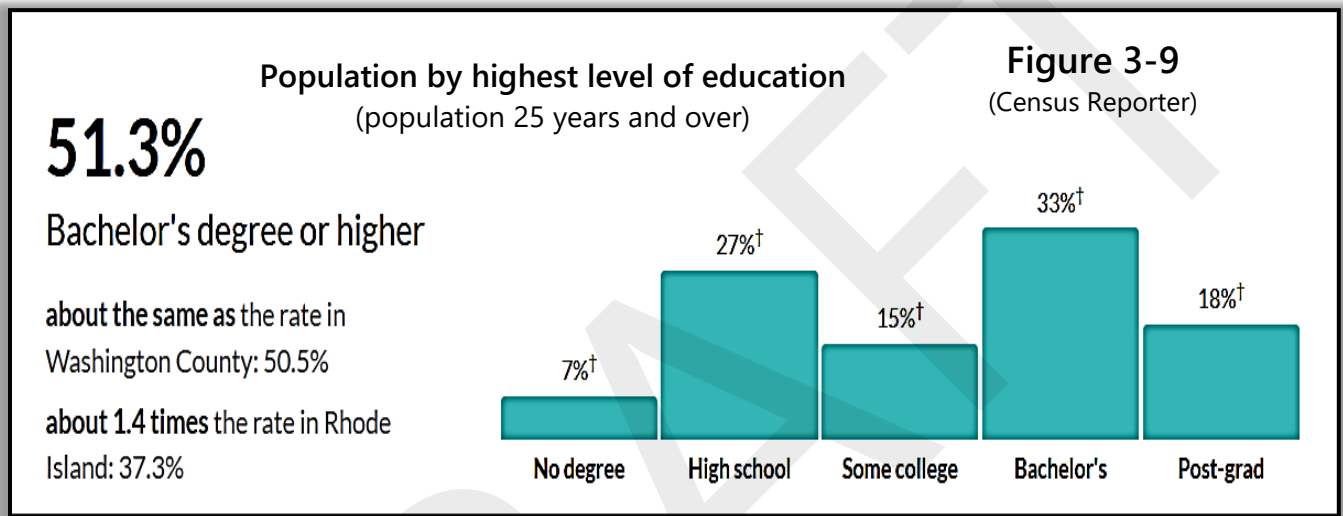
In terms of race and ethnicity, the 2020 Census for New Shoreham identifies 90.4±% of the residents as White, 3.9±% some other race, 3.6±% two or more races, 1.2±% Black or African American, 0.5±% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.4±% Asian, and 0±% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. Of New Shoreham’s population, 4.7±% identified as Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau. *New*, Race and Ethnicity).

Development in New Shoreham is highly homogeneous. Based on the 2023 ACS 5-year estimates, approximately 90.9% of the 1,947 housing units in Town are single family dwellings. The remainder are a mix of 2 units (2.9%), 3 or 4 units (1.2±%), and 5 or more units (4.9±%) (US Census Bureau. *New*, Housing). In terms of residential housing, the Old Harbor area is notably different and somewhat more diverse than the inland areas. The housing near Old Harbor is generally denser compared to the inland areas, and since Old Harbor is the central hub of the island there is more residential and commercial overlap. Many of the homes in the area of Old Harbor are vacation homes or short-term rentals due to the proximity to the ferry terminal, making it easy for tourists visiting the island. As you move away from the Old Harbor Historic District, the tendency is larger, single-family homes with bigger yards. These properties often cater more to year-round residents or seasonal retreats, with a quieter, more rural atmosphere.

Of the 1,947 housing units, the 2023 ACS only identifies 20.2±% (393 housing units) as occupied. Of the 393 occupied housing units, the majority (71.8±%) are owner occupied, with the remaining 28.2±% occupied by renters (US Census Bureau. *New*, Housing). It is important to note that most of the units characterized by the U.S. Census Bureau as vacant may be seasonal rental units or seasonal residents/vacation homes occupied by owners for specific time periods. As a seasonal destination, particularly between July and Labor Day, New Shoreham sees approximately 15,000 to 20,000 visitors per day, which includes both overnight guests and day-trippers (Wargo, 6), and seasonal laborers therein occupying many of the housing units unoccupied the rest of the year.

Almost a third (31.2±%) of New Shoreham’s homes were built before 1960, with 23.5±% built before 1940 (US Census Bureau. *New*, Housing). Some of these older homes may not have been updated to meet current building codes which creates concern in terms of hazard risks, particularly for high wind and heavy snow events.

According to the 2023 ACS 5-year estimates, the median household income is estimated as \$72,450 for New Shoreham, \$102,478 for Washington County, and \$86,372 for Rhode Island. The poverty rate is 10.1±% compared to 8.0±% for Washington County (US Census Bureau. *New*, Income and Poverty). Based on the 2023 ACS 1-year estimates, the poverty rate for the State of Rhode Island is 7.3±% (US Census Bureau. *Rhode*, Income and Poverty). The Town of New Shoreham is a well-educated community with 33.2±% of the population 25 years and over having a Bachelor's Degree or higher, and 18.1±% having a Graduate or professional degree (US Census Bureau. *New*, Education).



New Shoreham’s population has not experienced, nor is expected to experience in the relative near future, significant growth. As shown in **Table 3-1, if the census data is correct**, from 1990 to 2020 the population continually increased, with an overall increase during those three decades of 68.7±%. During those decades Rhode Island saw an overall increase in population of 9.4±%. In 2013, Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning (RIDSP) extrapolated mathematically from historic trends to project the future population of cities and towns through 2040. Projections for New Shoreham and the State are shown in the table. Comparing the projected 2040 population to the 2020 census population, it is estimated that New Shoreham’s population will decrease by 6.4±%.

Table 3-1 Population Trend and Projections

Jurisdiction	Actual Based on U.S. Census (Wikipedia. <i>Block</i>)				Projected Based on RIDSP (RIDSP. <i>Technical Paper 162, 16</i>)			
	1990	2000	2010	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040
Rhode Island	1,003,464	1,048,319	1,052,567	1,097,379	1,061,796	1,070,677	1,073,799	1,070,104
New Shoreham	836	1,010	1,051	1,410	1,189	1,239	1,283	1,319