

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

Stewart v. Town of Sedgwick

797 A.2d 27 (Me. 2002) · Decided May 16, 2002

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court affirmed a judgment upholding the Sedgwick Board of Appeals' approval of a permit for a dock, ramp, and float on Eggemoggin Reach. The court held that the proposed dock satisfied the Shoreland Zoning Ordinance's requirements concerning interference with beach areas, size, and consistency with the area's conditions and character. It also held that the ordinance's general purposes did not impose separate substantive permitting standards beyond the specific requirements in the ordinance.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Calkins, J.; Saufley, C.J.; Clifford, J.; Dana, J.; Alexander, J.; Levy, J.
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	May 16, 2002
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from a Superior Court judgment affirming a municipal Board of Appeals decision approving a dock permit; the Supreme Judicial Court reviewed the operative municipal decision.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviews the operative municipal decision for abuse of discretion, error of law, or findings unsupported by substantial evidence in the record. Interpretation of a zoning ordinance is reviewed de novo.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential decision of the Supreme Judicial Court of Maine.
PARTIES	Gordon W. Stewart v. Town of Sedgwick, Gardiner Schneider, Leslie Schneider

TOPICS

- zoning
- administrative law
- judicial review of agency action
- statutory interpretation
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Shoreland Zoning Ordinance prohibited construction of a dock on a natural beach or instead required a finding that the particular dock would not interfere with the beach.
2. Whether the ordinance's requirement that a dock be no larger than necessary required the applicants to prove an absolute need for a dock.
3. Whether substantial evidence supported the Board of Appeals' finding that the dock's size was consistent with the conditions, use, and character of the area.
4. Whether the ordinance's general-purpose provision independently required the applicants to prove that the dock conformed to each general purpose of the Shoreland Zoning Ordinance.

HOLDINGS

1. The ordinance did not categorically ban docks on beaches; it required a finding that the particular dock would not interfere with an existing developed or natural beach area.
2. The ordinance required the dock to be no larger than necessary for the intended activity; it did not require permit applicants to prove an absolute need for a dock as opposed to need related to the size of the proposed facility.
3. The Board's finding that the proposed dock's size was consistent with the conditions, use, and character of the area was supported by substantial evidence.
4. Applicants were not required to demonstrate that a proposed project independently adhered to each general purpose stated in the Shoreland Zoning Ordinance. The general purposes informed interpretation of the ordinance's specific requirements but did not themselves provide separate qualitative permitting standards.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"We review the Board's decision "for an abuse of discretion, error of law, or findings unsupported by substantial evidence in the record."" (§ 6)

"Section 15(C)(2), however, does not ban docks on beaches; it requires that there be a finding that the dock not interfere with the beach." (§ 7)

"Applicants for permits, however, are not required to demonstrate that their projects adhere to each of the general purposes." (§ 12)

"We conclude that the Board's decision that the Schneiders are entitled to the permit to build the dock is supported by substantial evidence, is not contrary to law, and does not constitute an abuse of discretion." (§ 13)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The Schneiders sought permission to construct a permanent wooden dock on epoxy-coated steel piles, together with a ramp and a seasonal sixteen-by-twenty-four-foot float, on their property along Eggemoggin Reach. The proposed dock would extend to the low-water mark and would be six feet high at the high-water mark. Stewart, a neighboring property owner, argued that the dock would interfere with a natural beach, was inconsistent with the conditions and character of the area, and could not be permitted absent proof that the Schneiders needed a dock.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Sedgwick Planning Board granted the Schneiders a permit to construct a dock, ramp, and float. Stewart appealed to the Board of Appeals, and after an earlier appeal in which the Supreme Judicial Court vacated the judgment because the Board had not conducted the required de novo review, the Board held a de novo hearing and again approved the permit. The Superior Court affirmed, and Stewart appealed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Stewart v. Town of Sedgwick, 2000 ME 157, ¶¶ 6-7, 15, 757 A.2d 773, 775-76, 778
- Springborn v. Town of Falmouth, 2001 ME 57, ¶ 8, 769 A.2d 852, 855
- Lentine v. Town of St. George, 599 A.2d 76, 79-80 (Me. 1991)
- Kosalka v. Town of Georgetown, 2000 ME 106, ¶ 17, 752 A.2d 183, 187

OPINION

Stewart v. Town of Sedgwick 2002 ME 79

CALKINS, J.

797 A.2d 27 (2002) 2002 ME 79 Gordon W. STEWART v. TOWN OF SEDGWICK et al. Supreme Judicial Court of Maine. Submitted on Briefs: March 26, 2002. Decided: May 16, 2002. May 15, 2002.

*28 Gordon W. Stewart, Wilmington, for plaintiff.

James E. Patterson, Ellsworth, (for Town of Sedgwick), Gardiner & Leslie Schneider, Sedgewick, for defendants. Panel: SAUFLEY, C.J., and CLIFFORD, DANA, ALEXANDER, CALKINS, and LEVY, JJ. CALKINS, J. [¶ 1] Gordon Stewart appeals from a judgment entered in the Superior Court (Hancock County, Mead, J.) affirming the decision by the Town of Sedgwick Board of Appeals which approved the issuance of a permit to Gardiner and Leslie Schneider to build a dock. Stewart contends that the Board of Appeals erred in determining that the proposed dock would not violate the Town's Shoreland Zoning Ordinance. Specifically, he argues that the Board erred in finding that the dock will not interfere with a natural beach and in finding that the size of the dock is consistent with the conditions, use, and character of the area. Stewart also contends that because the Schneiders did not show a need for the dock, the permit should not have

been granted. We affirm.

I. BACKGROUND AND PROCEDURE

[¶ 2] The Schneiders sought and obtained from the Sedgwick Planning Board a permit to construct a dock, ramp, and float on their property on Eggemoggin Reach. Stewart, a neighbor, appealed the issuance of the permit to the Board of Appeals which affirmed the Planning Board's decision, and Stewart then filed an action in Superior Court seeking judicial review pursuant to M.R. Civ. P. 80B. When the Superior Court affirmed the Board of Appeals, Stewart appealed to this Court, and we vacated the judgment for the reason that the Board did not review the Planning Board's decision de novo as required by 30-A M.R.S.A. § 2691(3)(D) (1996) in the absence of a town ordinance specifying another procedure. *Stewart v. Town of Sedgwick*, 2000 ME 157, ¶¶ 6-7, 15, 757 A.2d 773, 775-76, 778. On remand, the Board of Appeals held a de novo hearing, made findings of fact, and concluded that the Schneiders were entitled to the permit to construct the proposed dock, ramp, and float. Stewart, who participated in the Board hearings, again appealed to the Superior Court, which again affirmed the Board's decision. [¶ 3] At the Board of Appeals hearing following the remand, Stewart and the Schneiders made oral presentations, resubmitted various documents that had been given to the Board at the first hearing, and presented additional documents and photographs. The Schneiders described the proposed dock as consisting of a permanent section, constructed of wood, measuring two hundred by four feet, on epoxy coated steel piles and stringers reaching to the low water mark. Extending from the permanent dock will be a ramp and a sixteen by twenty-four foot float that will be removed for the winter. The height of the dock at the high water mark is to be six feet.

*29 [¶ 4] The primary points of contention before the Board of Appeals were whether the proposed dock met the standards in section 15(C)(2), (4) and section 16(D) of the Sedgwick Shoreland Zoning Ordinance.[1] Section 15(C)(2) required that the location of the dock "not interfere with existing developed or natural beach areas." Section 15(C)(4) required that the dock "be no larger in dimension than necessary to carry on the activity and be consistent with existing conditions, use, and character of the area." The portion of section 16(D), relied upon by Stewart, stated that the applicant had to prove that the dock "is in conformity with the purposes and provisions of this Ordinance."

[¶ 5] The Board voted separately on whether the requirements in section 15(C)(2) and (4) were met. The vote was three to two in finding that the dock would not interfere with existing beach areas. The Board members unanimously agreed that the size of the dock was no larger than necessary for its activity, but they divided three to two in voting that the size was consistent with the conditions, use, and character of the area. The Board voted three to two to uphold the Planning Board's grant of a permit.

II. DISCUSSION

[¶ 6] When the Superior Court has acted as an intermediate appellate court in a land use case, we review the operative decision of the municipality. *Springborn v. Town of Falmouth*, 2001 ME 57, ¶

8, 769 A.2d 852, 855. In this case the operative decision is that of the Board of Appeals following its de novo hearing. We review the Board's decision "for an abuse of discretion, error of law, or findings unsupported by substantial evidence in the record." *Id.* (citation omitted). The interpretation of a zoning ordinance is a question of law that we review de novo. *Id.* We examine the plain meaning of the language of the ordinance, and we construe its terms reasonably in light of the purposes and objectives of the ordinance and its general structure. *Id.* [¶ 7] Stewart first contends that the ordinance prohibits the construction of any dock on a beach because all docks built on a beach interfere with the beach. He interprets section 15(C)(2) of the ordinance as confining the construction of docks to locations either above the high water mark or where there is no beach. Section 15(C)(2), however, does not ban docks on beaches; it requires that there be a finding that the dock not interfere with the beach. The Board made such a finding. To the extent that Stewart is arguing that the finding is not supported by the record, he has not called our attention to any matter in the record that would compel a finding that this particular proposed dock will interfere with the beach on which it *30 will be constructed.[2]See *Lentine v. Town of St. George*, 599 A.2d 76, 80 (Me.1991). [¶ 8] Stewart also argues that the Board erred in finding that the size of the dock was no larger than necessary to carry on the activity. Ordinance, § 15(C)(4). In this case the activity is access to the Schneiders' boat as that is the reason given by the Schneiders for wanting to build the dock. Stewart contends that the ordinance provision, by using the word "necessary," must be interpreted to mean that the Schneiders were required to demonstrate their need for the dock. He maintains that as long as the Schneiders have access to their boat through another means, such as mooring the boat in the nearby river and using their skiff to reach the boat, they have no need for a dock on their property. However, the meaning of the ordinance is plain: the dock should be no larger than necessary to carry on the activity. Stewart's novel argument that the ordinance requires the permit applicant to show absolute need, as opposed to need in relationship to size for the intended activity, would stretch the ordinance beyond reason. Other than arguing that the Schneiders have no need for a dock and that such a need is a prerequisite to a permit, Stewart made no argument that the proposed dock was too large for its intended purpose. [¶ 9] Stewart also contends that the size of the proposed dock is not consistent with the conditions, use, and character of the area. Ordinance, § 15(C)(4). In his oral presentation to the Board, Stewart eloquently described the pristine nature of the area, and the record contains photographs showing the beauty of Eggemoggin Reach. There was also discussion at the Board hearing of a number of other docks within two miles of the Schneider property. The Schneiders furnished photographs of several of the docks in the area. From the portion of the record that has been furnished to us, we cannot conclude that the Board's finding that the size of the proposed dock was consistent with the conditions, use, and character of the area, is unsupported by substantial evidence. [¶ 10] A similarly worded ordinance regarding the size of piers, docks, and wharfs was at issue in *Lentine v. Town of St. George*, 599 A.2d at 77-78 n. 2. We interpreted the St. George ordinance, as applied to a wharf, to mean that its size could not be larger than necessary for its purpose and its size had

to be consistent with the conditions, use, and character of the area. *Id.* at 79. The Sedgwick Board of Appeals cited to *Lentine* and correctly applied the same interpretation to the Schneiders' dock that we had applied to the wharf in *Lentine*. [¶ 11] Stewart finally argues that the Board erred by not requiring the Schneiders to prove that the dock would conform to the general purposes of the Shoreland Ordinance. Stewart relies on the portion of section 16(D) of the Ordinance that reads: "The applicant shall have the burden of proving that the proposed land use activity is in conformity with the purposes and provisions of this *31 Ordinance." This appears on its face simply to state who has the burden of persuasion when a person makes an application to the Planning Board for a permit. Stewart, however, reads into this provision a substantive requirement that the Schneiders must have demonstrated that the dock conforms with the general purposes of the Shoreland Ordinance contained in section 1. That section, which is entitled "Purposes," reads: The purposes of this Ordinance are to further the maintenance of safe and healthful conditions; to prevent and control water pollution; to protect fish spawning grounds, aquatic life, bird and other wildlife habitat; to protect buildings and lands from flooding and accelerated erosion; to protect archaeological and historic resources; to protect commercial fishing and maritime industries; to protect freshwater and coastal wetlands; to control building sites, placement of structures and land uses; to conserve shore cover, and visual as well as actual points of access to inland and coastal waters; to conserve natural beauty and open space; and to anticipate and respond to the impacts of development in shoreland areas. More specifically, Stewart contends that the Schneiders did not show that the dock would conform to the purposes of conserving visual access to coastal waters and conserving natural beauty and open space. [¶ 12] Applicants for permits, however, are not required to demonstrate that their projects adhere to each of the general purposes. Instead, the general purposes provide the framework for the specific requirements of the ordinance, such as those found in section 15(C) dealing with piers, docks, and wharfs. The general purposes inform and guide the interpretation of the more specific provisions. The Schneiders were required to demonstrate that their proposed dock met the requirements of section 15(C). The provisions of section 15(C) requiring that the dock not interfere with the beach and that the size of the dock be consistent with existing conditions are specific means by which the general purposes, including the purposes of conserving visual access, open space, and natural beauty, are carried out. While the general purposes are useful for the officials and others who must interpret the ordinance, they themselves do not provide the qualitative standards necessary for the evenhanded administration of a zoning ordinance. The general purposes of conserving visual access, open space, and natural beauty, if utilized as separate standards upon which permits were denied, would likely suffer the fate of being declared unconstitutionally vague. See *Kosalka v. Town of Georgetown*, 2000 ME 106, ¶ 17, 752 A.2d 183, 187 (holding that requirement to "conserve natural beauty" is an unconstitutional condition because it is unmeasurable and "lacking in cognizable, quantitative standards").[3] [¶ 13] We conclude that the Board's decision that the Schneiders are entitled to the permit to build the dock is supported by substantial evidence, is not contrary to law, and does not

constitute an abuse of discretion. The entry is: Judgment affirmed.

NOTES

[1] Section 15 of the Shoreland Zoning Ordinance for the Municipality of Sedgwick is entitled "Land Use Standards" and reads in pertinent part:

All land use activities within the shoreland zone shall conform with the following provisions, if applicable. C. Piers, Docks, Wharfs, Bridges, and Other Structures and Uses Extending Over or Beyond the Normal High-Water Line of a Water Body or Within a Wetland.

1. Access from shore shall be developed on soils appropriate for such use and constructed so as to control erosion.
2. The location shall not interfere with existing developed or natural beach areas.
3. The facility shall be located so as to minimize adverse effects on fisheries.
4. The facility shall be no larger in dimension than necessary to carry on the activity and be consistent with existing conditions, use, and character of the area.

[2] An argument by Stewart that we do not reach is that section 15(C)(2) is unconstitutional unless it is interpreted to require the permitting authority to balance the applicant's need for the dock against the public's interest in protecting the beach from development. The ordinance does not lend itself to an interpretation that would require the balancing test proposed by Stewart. Because we are loath to reach constitutional issues unless absolutely necessary, we do not do so here. A holding that section 15(C)(2) is unconstitutional would not assist Stewart. If the section were unconstitutional, it would be declared invalid, and the Schneiders would prevail in obtaining their permit because they met the other requirements of the ordinance. See *Kosalka v. Town of Georgetown*, 2000 ME 106, ¶ 17, 752 A.2d 183, 187.

[3] Stewart also contends that if section 15(C)(2) is not interpreted to ban all docks from beaches, it must be interpreted in light of the purposes of the ordinance. While we agree with this contention, we do not agree that the Board of Appeals failed to consider the general purposes when it found that the proposed dock would not interfere with the beach.