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DETERMINED TO SECEDE

Members of the Peaks Island Independence Committee walk up Exchange Street to Portland City Hall on Friday. Moderator Michael Richards, right, carries the petition. Behind him is Judy Piawlock, secretary-treasurer.
Islanders deliver a petition seeking a City Council hearing on their bid to leave Portland.

By KELLEY BOUCHARD
Staff Writer

A delegation of 15 Peaks Island residents boarded the 10 a.m. ferry Friday morning, landed in Portland 20 minutes later and slogged up the hill through the slushy Old Port to City Hall.

The mission: to deliver a petition for a public hearing on the island's latest call for independence.

Once inside City Hall, the group gathered in the first-floor rotunda to hear its moderator, Michael Richards, read a statement of purpose before handing over 600 signatures to the city clerk on the second floor.

"We, the undersigned registered voters of Peaks Island, Maine, wish to decide whether to secede from the city of Portland in order to achieve financial independence and to determine for ourselves all issues of importance to our community," Richards announced with the tone of a town crier. "We are here again, at the doorstep of our independence, and with the help of our friends and our neighbors, and by the grace of God, this time we will prevail."

It has been 11 years since Peaks Island residents lost their last bid to secede from Portland by one vote of the Maine Senate. Once again, prodded by a recent property tax increase and a desire for self-determination, a group

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WHAT'S NEXT
THE SIGNATURES handed in to City Hall Friday are aimed at forcing the City Council to hold a secession hearing.

THE ISLAND must also hold an advisory referendum on the question. The City Council may also hold a citywide referendum.

ULTIMATELY, the Legislature must approve the Peaks Island secession. Peaks lost its bid 11 years ago by one vote in the state Senate.
of islanders is seeking a City Council hearing to consider leaving the fold. Members of the Peaks Island Independence Committee admit that some people signed the petition simply because they wanted a fair airing of the issue before deciding whether becoming a separate town is a good idea. Others have wanted to be on their own for years and hope to follow Long Island, another Casco Bay community that seceded from Portland 13 years ago.

"I think we can do just as well as Long Island is doing," said Shirley Edwards, Portland's island liaison, who met the delegation at the door of City Hall. Porter said he dedicated most of his time to Peaks Island, which has about 900 year-round residents and a summer population of 3,000.

"Every island community is unique," Fortier said, "but Peaks really is another neighborhood of the city, not unlike Stroudwater or North Deering, in seeking independence. In seeking independence, some Peaks residents say they hope to reduce or triple taxes, which doubled or tripled for many islanders following the city's recent rezoning."

Mayor James Cohen, who also met the city council's office, said he respects it's taking the committee's submission seriously but believes it's taking the committee in an "unfortunate direction." Cohen favors regionalization and greater sharing of resources to save money. He worries that Peaks secession would lead to greater duplication of services rather than the reduction he hopes for.

"Portland and Peaks Island are much better together than we would be apart," Cohen said. "The City Clerk's office is working with all the state petitions being filed. We will take care of those petitions."

Committee members have been turned in a month to make sure the estimated 400 signatures needed to get a hearing have been submitted.

Community and council votes would follow, as well as mandatory mediation efforts, before the issue could be submitted to the Legislature.

Elsewhere in Casco Bay, Chebeague Island residents are negotiating possible secession from the town of Cumberland.