

## **APPENDIX J – Part 2: ARTS AND CULTURE**

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The City of Saco has long partnered with the City of Biddeford in promoting the arts and culture of both communities. Both communities share a rich heritage (including a strong Franco-American heritage) and the Saco River, have walkable downtowns within minutes of each other and repurposed mill buildings that are filling up with new residents and some businesses.

A vital component to a thriving community's downtown is ensuring that local arts and community culture have a living, tangible presence there. This chapter will focus on the linkages between Saco's downtown and the community's creative culture and how even more connections might be made to the benefit of both.

### **A. RECENT ARTS AND CULTURE ADVANCEMENT EFFORTS**

In 2004, a group led by the Dyer Library/Saco Museum obtained a Discovery Research grant from the Maine Arts Commission to "identify the cultural needs of the two cities and to plan how to provide for them." The City of Saco and the Dyer Library/Saco Museum consulted with the Maine Arts Commission which encouraged the Saco-based effort to include the City of Biddeford and its cultural organizations. The City of Biddeford, MacArthur Library and City Theatre Associates joined the effort. The Discovery Research effort yielded public forums held in both communities, an arts and culture inventory and ethnic and cultural histories/profiles compiled by a folklorist.

As that effort wound down, it was re-energized in 2005 through another joint effort between Biddeford and Saco which created the Twin Cities Cultural Planning Committee. This Committee, whose membership included officials from both cities, a University of New England staff member, teachers, artists, cultural event organizers, downtown organization staff, theatre staff, business representatives, and library and museum staff, produced The Twin Cities Cultural Plan in 2006. The Plan lays out a vision and a strategy for advancing and promoting the creative community in both communities. Another key tenet of the Plan called for the formation of a Cultural Council that would implement the Plan's goals. That group, the Twin Cities Creative Council, was formed and held the "Milling About" art exhibition to celebrate the Plan's creation. A second "Milling About" was held in 2008. The Council disbanded not long afterward.

In 2013, Engine, a Biddeford non-profit organization founded several years previously, in part to meld support for the arts into a driver for economic development, formed the Biddeford + Saco Arts + Cultural Alliance (BSACA) which serves to market the two cities as a tourist destination and to implement the goals of the Cultural Plan. Member organizations include City Theater, Arts@UNE, the Biddeford Mills Museum, Societe St. Jean de Bienfaisance, La Kermesse, McArthur Library, Saco Museum and Dyer Library. The Heart of Biddeford, Saco Maine Street (formerly Saco Spirit), and the Biddeford+Saco Chamber are also members. BSACA maintains an active Facebook account which serves to advertise and promote art, crafts, music and cultural events as well as classes on various topics such as photography and painting.

## **B. THE CULTURAL PLAN**

The 2006 Twin Cities Cultural Plan was based on the two public forums mentioned earlier, the results of two surveys, one of artists and performers etc. and one of the general public living in both communities), three focus group forums, and further work on an inventory of existing arts and cultural institutions, both local and in other communities.

The focal points identified by the Cultural Plan include the diversity and rich shared history of the two cities and the belief that arts and culture should be inclusive and viewed as economic engines to help drive economic development. The Plan's actions were based on the focal points and the vision statement: *"Highlighting, enhancing and sustaining the region's creative economy by promoting collaboration among the diverse communities of Biddeford and Saco."*

### **1. The Plan's Goals and Actions**

The Cultural Plan contains five overarching goals which support the implementation plan's actions. The Plan's goals are:

Goal #1 – Artists and businesses interact and support each other.

Goal #2 – The larger community actively supports local arts and culture

Goal #3 – The community understands and appreciates the history and contributions of local ethnic and cultural groups

Goal #4 – Children learn to celebrate arts and culture from young ages.

Goal #5 – Local leaders continually work to sustain the arts and culture communities

The Plan's Actions are grouped according to a timeframe. There were immediate (within that year, 2006), short term (the next two years, 2007-2008) and long term (beyond 2009) actions. For example, the immediate actions included:

Action #1 – Establish local Creative Council

Action #2 – Create a brand identity

Action #3 – Establish regular networking events for the creative community

Action #4 – Hold biannual open studio/open mill events

As mentioned earlier, the non-profit arts organization, Engine, stepped in some years after the Creative Council disbanded in 2007. Engine has addressed some of the Cultural Plan's goals and actions, for instance, by creating maker space, doing some branding, running educational programs in the arts, holding events and maintaining an active Facebook account that regularly posts events and activities going on. In addition, Engine has assistance in promoting arts and cultural events through the Heart of Biddeford which is Biddeford's accredited Main Street organization similar to Saco Main Street.

## **2. Arts and Culture in Saco**

The Dyer Library, the Saco Museum and Saco Main Street host most of the cultural events held in Saco. For example, the Library held a Harry Potter-themed event for children recently and holds art shows featuring art done by students. Classes, such as watercolor painting, are regularly offered. The Museum curated a needle-work exhibition that was reported on by the New York Times, holds events that feature docents costumed in historic apparel and exhibits that change with the seasons. Each year the Museum holds the Festival of Trees during the holiday season. The Dyer Library/Saco Museum would like to hold more events for both adults and children – with performers, speakers and authors – but doing more of this type of programming is currently beyond their current budget. Saco is fortunate that the Dyer Library and Saco Museum are located in the downtown, adjacent to each other.

Saco Main Street holds events throughout the year: the Holiday Festival and Parade of Lights, the Pumpkin Harvest Festival, the Sidewalk Art Festival and the Classic Car Show. Also held during the summer of 2016, the "Adirondacks on Main", which featured Adirondack chairs painted by artists on display along Main Street which were auctioned off at the end of the summer. Another successful event was the "Music in the Park"ing Lot concerts which were held between the Dyer Library and Saco Museum buildings. Each summer, Saco Main Street sponsors seasonal projects such as planting

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flowering window boxes along Maine Street.

The River Jam, a joint effort by Saco Main Street and its sister organization, The Heart of Biddeford, is held in September. This event features musical performers, foot, stand up board and kayak races and other kinds of family fun.

The Stone Soup Artisans Cooperative in Saco showcases local arts, crafts and Maine-made products. The store is a member of the Society of Southern Maine Craftsmen and participates in the Biddeford-Saco Art Walk which happens during the warmer months on the last Friday of the month.

Saco is also home to the only Painting with a Twist franchise in Maine. Painting with a Twist features a friendly studio environment where customers are led through the process of creating their own painting by an artist while sipping their favorite beverage. Events for families or children are held during the day.

Thornton Academy offers Saco's middle and high school students an array of courses in the arts, ranging from visual arts to performing arts. Upper school students can choose from classes in photography, illustration, painting, sculpture, dance, music and theatre.

### **C. THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN**

The City of Saco has compiled an impressive array of plans and reports in the last 10 years (including the Downtown Plan, adopted in 2007 and revised in 2013) on many aspects of the City. One of the most recent was the Saco Bridge 2025. This project brought a number of focus groups together to voice what people love about Saco now, what they'd like to fix or change, what they'd like to see for Saco's schools and to identify the key elements of the respondents' desired vision of Saco in 2025. There was also a survey which asked questions in a similar vein. Among the things that Saco residents said they loved about Saco now are the parades and community events, the natural assets like beaches and trails and the downtown. The top two things these residents said they'd like to fix or change were revitalizing the downtown and traffic.

There are strong connections to be made between arts/culture, a community's downtown and its pedestrians, bicyclists and even motorists. When vehicular traffic is calmed, pedestrians and bicyclists feel more comfortable and are more likely to use the sidewalks and roads. When people get out of their cars and walk, they are more likely to explore and maybe duck into a shop or visit a restaurant they haven't been to before. When a community's downtown features art and culture both in the public and private realms, there is even more reason for people to linger and explore.

Besides a walkable downtown, Saco has valuable existing natural assets such as beaches, parks, the river and open space that Saco residents feel fortunate to have so close by. Connecting that natural world to the downtown perhaps through evocative art and wayfinding (for both bicyclists and pedestrians) along with providing some green space and benches along the way can foster a sense of respite. These same spaces, especially those within the downtown or nearby, can also provide a gathering place for music, performances or story-telling. Such welcoming spaces to gather add to a downtown's sense of vitality simply by attracting people.

When planning for green spaces in a downtown and attractive pedestrian-friendly streets, most especially given the ever warmer summer temperatures, it is important to provide shade. Urban trees, chosen for their adaptability to urban conditions, can provide a number of benefits. To name just a few: stormwater management, cleaner air and water, cooling of streets, sidewalks and buildings, shade, and beauty. Studies done in large communities, such as New York City, have also found that people are more attracted to buildings with trees near them and in a downtown environment, building values are also influenced by street trees. Saco is currently a Tree City USA member which indicates that the City has made a commitment to its trees. It is challenging to keep trees growing and healthy in urban environments and even harder to replace trees once they have been removed. In tighter spaces where trees may not work, shrubs and perennials can enhance green spaces and streets, providing many of the same benefits except for shade and cooling.

The Riverwalk that Saco shares with Biddeford is another gem that may not be fully appreciated. The City has mapped out the Riverwalk on the Saco side but only a few wayfinding signs exist to point the way. The Riverwalk passes through both urbanized and more natural areas in Saco and could provide collaborative opportunities for local artists/artisans on both sides of the Saco River (perhaps even Thornton Academy art students) to provide public art. There may also be opportunity to tell some local history stories—through the Museum in the Streets program for instance, ([www.themuseuminthestreets.com](http://www.themuseuminthestreets.com)).

One of the other things that the focus groups in the Bridge 2025 report mentioned wanting were more restaurants in town. Food, especially food sourced from local Maine farms and prepared by local chefs, has become an important addition to the arts and culture scene in Maine. Eating out is one of our national pass times and can be considered entertainment of sorts – think about how some restaurants in Portland offer bar stools from which a diner can watch his/her meal be prepared. The City of Saco has the capacity and population to support several more restaurants, especially those that go beyond pizza and sandwiches or do them with a twist.

As of this writing, two new restaurants, both located just steps from Main Street, are set to open in the next several months. One of them, Cia Cafe, will be serving coffee, sandwiches, local ice cream and featuring local art – it may well become a gathering place for Saco residents.

Another challenge that has been identified by Saco residents is that it is difficult to find a place that serves food much past 8:00 or 9:00 pm. Attending a performance or an art show and being able to grab a bite afterward is a common desire that isn't easy to accommodate in Saco. Some communities have recognized that people also like to shop after going out to dinner and so shops stay open late on certain nights. As more people choose to live in the downtown area (for example in the Notre Dame church redevelopment project that was approved in 2017), Saco will also look more attractive to people looking to open restaurants or start small performing arts venues as well as shops thinking about expanding their hours.

#### **D. ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS**

- Despite multiple joint arts and culture planning efforts over the past 12 years, neither the City of Saco nor the City of Biddeford have committed to promoting arts and culture as a means to drive economic development.
- Saco has a pleasant walkable downtown – something many communities envy - but there are few gathering places or green spaces in or near downtown.
- The Riverwalk seems to be somewhat underutilized and may need improvements and more promotion via maps, apps, and wayfinding.
- The Dyer Library and the Saco Museum could offer more cultural programs and events if additional funding were made available. Their location on Main Street would help make new events even more visible to passersby.
- With more housing appearing in the downtown neighborhoods (such as the Notre Dame church redevelopment and Mill Building #4) Saco has an opportunity to engage those “feet on the street” and keep them attending local performances/shows, visiting downtown shops, and eating locally.
- Saco Main Street is the main promoter of downtown events. According to the Bridge 2025 report, Saco residents cherish their city's events and seem eager for more. The City may want to explore partnering with Saco Main Street to bring addition events to the downtown.