

## **Report to the Mayor and Council of the City of Saco on the information collected in the public phase of Saco Bridge:2025**

In the spring of 2014, the Mayor and Council of Saco agreed to undertake a series of activities to engage the public in a long range planning process for Saco. Phase I is designed to engage the public in a visioning process and collect the public's input to assist the Mayor and Council in agreeing on a vision of Saco in 2025 and on key, specific priorities on which the city would then focus its efforts. Phase II will be an opportunity for the staff to develop a work plan that reflects the direction set by the Mayor and Council.

The creation of a formal, Council approved vision for 2025 and a set of key priorities will allow the Council to focus its regular work on the key issues identified by it and the public. It will serve as a guide post as the Council makes its regular decisions on the budget and the capital improvements for Saco. Based on the enthusiasm of the participants in the public process and the consistency of the issues identified, the public will likely be a positive player in the efforts to move the vision and priorities forward.

The purpose of this report is to draw out the major themes identified by the public and to help the Mayor and Council understand the nature of the data as an expression of public opinion.

### **The Process:**

The process began with the creation of a Working Committee and then a Vision Process Steering Committee (VPSC) made up of Saco community members, the Mayor, 2 Councilors and city staff. This committee met 3 times to: help design and direct the public information gathering, to provide ongoing guidance as the process got under way and to review and offer suggestions on this report. Members of the VPSC also provided volunteer assistance in recruiting the people to be part of the small focus groups and the larger community session, helping promote the process, and assisting in facilitating the Community meeting. Their help was invaluable. *(See the appendix for the list of members and meeting notes.)*

After much planning, the project was launched publicly with a professionally designed web site, [www.sacobridge2025.org](http://www.sacobridge2025.org) in late October. It promoted and reported on the focus group meetings, the community group meeting, as well as the survey, which could be done on line as well as in a paper version. It was designed to engage people in the process and keep the public informed. The site continues to inform people on the progress of the project.

The next step was the small focus groups in November. Twelve 1.5 hour sessions were held with groups ranging from 5-25 participants. Each meeting was loosely grouped around a common interest such as business people, students, beach communities or people west of 95. Each group was asked the same four questions that were taken from the survey. In all over 130 people participated and 50 organizations were involved. *(See the appendix for the summary of themes and full notes.)*

On Saturday, December 6, there was a widely promoted Community Meeting for the general public. In spite of the freezing rain that morning, 41 members of the public showed up and joined a number of people from the Planning Committee and staff who had agreed to facilitate the breakout groups. It was a lively session that again posed the four questions that were asked in the small groups. *(See the appendix for the summary of themes and full notes.)*

The survey asked the same questions as the meetings, plus 4 additional questions. It was available to the public on line and distributed in printed form in many places around the community. 199 people filled in surveys by the time it closed on January 1, 2015. *(See the appendix for the summary of themes and full data on all the responses.)*

### **The information collected:**

All the information collected has been collated and key themes extracted from the many comments. You have four levels of detail available to you: 1) the summary of all information gathering in this report. 2) the summary of key themes from the separate information gathering techniques: focus groups, community group and surveys. 3) the summary of themes with supporting detail for the focus groups and 4) the full detailed notes from all the meetings and the complete surveys. Although the full meeting notes and survey responses look daunting in length, they do contain some interesting and potentially valuable comments that didn't rise to the level of a theme, since only one or two people mentioned the idea. It would be worth spending a long, snowy, winter evening looking for them.

The information represents the opinions of the roughly 370 people who participated in the process. Although that is not a large percentage of Saco's population, it is comparable in number to the 400 calls made in the regular survey of citizens on City services. In constructing the focus group sessions, there was a concerted effort reach a cross section of groups, interests, organizations, areas of town and perspectives. In addition, we looked for people with expertise in certain areas as well as known and respected in various fields. The recurrent themes that appeared across these diverse groups are one of the interesting results of the process.

It is important to understand what this collection of information is and is not. These opinions reflect the way these respondents experience their lives in Saco. Two people can look out the window at the same view and have two very different descriptions of what they see. The opinions may or may not be well grounded in data and facts, but it is their reality, as they see it and represents their thinking. Even where opinions may be different from your analysis of the data, it is important to know how the Saco citizens see and interpret their community.

The process itself generated energy and enthusiasm. People were sharing their interests or concerns, problem solving together, agreeing (or disagreeing) on what to fix and how to fix it, getting excited about ways to make their community even better. There is an interest in having a vision for the future of Saco that they feel a part of and a plan to accomplish that vision rather than letting things develop randomly.

## **The summary report:**

There are clearly themes that came to the fore consistently across the meetings and surveys and some areas of broad agreement.

### **What do people love about Saco now?** *(combines the meetings' question 1 and the survey questions 1,2,4 and 6)*

1. Saco residents share a warm, friendly sense of community. They like its small town feel, a sense of belonging where residents know their neighbors, help one another and love their community based activities from parades to arts events to football and soccer games. They find the community quiet, safe and supportive. Participating in community events such as Saco Spirit, parades, and other community activities rated high as well. It was widely mentioned and eloquently described in all the meetings and many of the surveys.
2. Saco residents love their historic, small city and its remarkably beautiful natural setting with its open farm lands, beaches and river. This mix of urban and natural assets seems remarkable and special to many respondents. In the survey question on favorite things to do in Saco, walking, running or biking on the many trails, along the beach, by the river or just downtown got 158 comments out of 199 surveys. That was followed by a long list of other outdoor activities. Living in Saco lets residents have all this close at hand.
3. People love downtown Saco. It was mentioned consistently in the top three issues in questions that asked what they liked. They like having an attractive, historic, “quintessential New England town center” that had shops, eateries and services all within walking distance. Many people love their neighborhood because they can walk from the quiet area they live in to downtown.
4. People value the location of Saco and see it as a selling point for prospective families and businesses. Saco’s easy access to the turnpike, the Amtrak connection the Zoom bus, the location between Portland (and the Maine Mall) and Boston makes for easy commuting for work, shopping, vacationing or receiving/shipping goods for businesses. Location was the top of the list for reasons why a family or business would move to Saco with 69 mentions.
5. Although mentioned less frequently than the other qualities listed above, there were several comments on aspects of City government that people appreciated such as the Parks and Recreation programs and other services such as firemen, medics, police and city officials who were described as friendly and helpful. Some found the city proactive on land preservation and forward thinking.

## **What do people want to fix or change?** *(combines mtg question 2 & survey questions 2 and 5)*

No matter how much people love Saco, they had plenty of ideas on what should be fixed or changed. Two issues rose to the top of the list: revitalization of downtown and traffic.

1. People love the accessibility, services, shops and community activities in downtown, but feel it needs much more to truly revitalize it. People are looking for a more vibrant place with a greater variety of restaurants, shops and activities so that more of their shopping needs can be met downtown. They want gathering places such as coffee shops and open public areas. They want to see the mill redeveloped with a combination of housing and start up businesses and a real connection to the rest of Main Street. They are looking for more community events downtown such as parades, art show and music. All this would better serve local people and draw visitors as well.
2. Traffic was the next most often mentioned area that needed fixing. Downtown was the most commented on area especially the need for a light at the intersection of Gooch and Main Streets. Further north on Main Street also presented some traffic and pedestrian challenges that needed fixing. Other traffic concerns were: the need for a second access to Interstate 95 (in particular, re-opening the former exit at route 112); improvement of the intersections of Industrial Park Road by the Turnpike exit and at route 112; the intersection of route 112 and Jenkins Road; Ferry Road's need for pedestrian and bike lanes; and the Flagg Pond Road interchange. The traffic comments were often combined with parking needs down town and pedestrian concerns. Clogged/fast traffic made pedestrian crossings difficult and dangerous, especially by the school area on Main Street. There were suggestions to better maintain sidewalks in general and especially in the winter, to provide bike lanes and add sidewalks in areas without them. Traffic was the most often mentioned subject in need of change in the surveys with 50 mentions.
3. Business development is another area where people are interested in improvement. Citizens want to see economic development city wide in order to increase the property tax base and as well as provide more job opportunities and diversity in retail options in the City. Development opportunities mentioned included: development of the mill buildings (several mentions), a big recreational facility and a convention/conference center. In the question on what would draw businesses to Saco, people suggested the proximity of good transportation, the available space both downtown and in the industrial park and an available work force made Saco attractive for development. Comments also included supporting the businesses already in town and bringing back areas like Five Corners. However, the citizens want to be smart about growth, not letting growth destroy the historic buildings or attractiveness of the city, eat up all the open space or expand the "strip franchises" area. Residents want the City to have a thoughtful master plan and be encouraging to business. Some respondents found the city government to be welcoming and helpful while other thought that city procedures needed to be faster and more business friendly.

4. The issue of city property taxes was raised most notably in survey questions 3 and 5 and in some focus groups as well. A number of people feel that property taxes are high, have been rising consistently and need to come down. In survey question #5, it was the primary reason by far (75 mentions) that respondents feel that people and businesses would be discouraged from coming to Saco. There were multiple perspectives on the causes of the rising taxes, but the suggested solutions fell into two camps 1) reduce costs and services and/or 2) build the commercial tax base so that the residential property tax payers carried a smaller portion of the load. There are other opinions voiced on property taxes that said they are average or low and not an obstacle, but they are the minority view among respondents.

**What do people want to see for Saco's school system?** What do they love, or want to change? What is their vision of what it should be in 2025? (combines meeting questions 1 and 3 and survey questions 1, 3 and 7)

1. Saco's school system is part of what people love about Saco, especially the relationship with Thornton Academy. They feel fortunate to have good schools and see it as a draw for families to move to Saco. In the question on why would a family move to Saco, the schools were second on the list with 77 mentions. Residents are strong supporters of the sports teams, foot ball in particular, which they see as a community wide activity.
2. Many respondents are looking for a school system that will serve all students whether college bound or looking for vocational training, whether needing extra challenge, extra help or special education. "Every student is taught to his/her highest ability". This is a theme in both the meetings and survey responses. There is a concern that there was no place for students looking for vocational training rather than a four year college. Similarly there are comments looking for more focus on challenging the gifted, helping the special education population and supporting the average student. Saco citizens want all their children to leave school prepared for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to know how to manage their lives, to be optimally employable and to be engaged citizens and community leaders.
3. For many people, smart, effective teachers are the key to their children's education. They want teachers that "teach kids how to think not what to think", quality teaching keeping up with modern pedagogy, teachers "showing the love, the passion to teach" helping children to excel. Teachers should be evaluated and paid well.

4. Respondents voice significant concerns about the condition of the school system's building and respondents' visions included replacement or repairs in many areas. There are strong feelings especially on the replacement of the Young School facility. Several would like to see Young and Fairfield consolidated into one new or significantly better school. A smaller number prefer smaller, neighborhood schools. Many people would like all the Saco school facilities upgraded with safety improvements, more space, modernized technologies and a better environment for learning. Some prefer a consolidated, modern K-5,6 or 8 facility. But all of these respondents want facilities upgraded and modernized.
5. Citizens have several suggestions for new and innovative ways to teach including experiential learning, schedules in line with the sleep habits of younger and older students, more hands on learning and a longer school year. They want the students to be able to learn the latest technological skills. But, at the same time, many speak about maintaining the basics (literacy, math, history and science). Some suggest improvements in special education and behavioral health, others would expand health education and physical activity. There is interest in giving the arts as much attention as sports.
6. In both the meetings and the surveys people describe a vision of more interaction between the students and the general community. The vision includes service learning and student engagement in the community as well as more community people volunteering in the schools, especially the older population. People see it as building community, developing citizenship, improving education, introducing young people to business through visits and internships and building pride in the schools from all sectors of the community.
7. For the large majority of respondents, the relationship with Thornton Academy is a real asset to the community. However, a noticeable number feel that the transition from the Saco system to Thornton Academy is difficult, that there are not enough vocational training options. Their vision includes a smooth transition with a wider variety of learning options.

### **What are the key elements of respondents' desired vision of Saco in 2025?**

1. Respondents envision a friendly, welcoming community. They want a small town with a strong sense of community where people help one another, show kindness and courtesy to one another and engage in community activities. Everyone is engaged and volunteering. It is a place with lots of community events and Saco "Spirit" is alive and well. Saco is "vibrant with community spirit, optimism and activity". Saco is a great place to live, work, learn, play and visit. Young people choose to stay or to come back to settle and raise families. This strong sense of community was the most cited vision response in the Community meeting and the focus groups and was second in the survey responses.

2. Saco citizens want a thriving downtown. It was the second most mentioned theme in the focus groups and the community meeting and the first in the survey. In 2025, they see more restaurants, entertainment, shops and businesses in the downtown area. Saco Island's mill is fully restored with both innovative businesses and housing. There is a shared sense of vitality flowing between Biddeford and Saco. *"Bridge it with Biddeford because something big, beautiful and profitable can happen at that mill."* There are public open spaces and gathering places. The area is bustling with people of all ages, both local and visitors. There is plenty of parking, easy pedestrian access, safe sidewalks and cross walks and good public transportation making downtown easy to access and pedestrian friendly. The City had grown its downtown businesses and activities while maintaining and enhancing its historic nature and restoring its older homes. It is a model of blending the quaint historic nature with a bustling modern economy.
  
3. Business development in general is also a major theme. Respondents see steady, sustainable, manageable growth of commercial activity throughout the City done thoughtfully to control its impact. *"Growth is stable and continuous and is following our updated continuous improvement plan."* From that growth the respondents are looking for quality jobs, low unemployment, a reduction in the share of property taxes paid by residents and more retail options. They envision industries, high tech businesses, innovative start ups and retail. People see a business friendly attitude in the city where it is less time consuming to get the necessary permits and easier to bring housing units on line.
  
4. Respondents' vision also includes an outstanding educational system that the whole community is invested in. The facilities are upgraded and use by community as well as the children. Everyone is proud of them. All the children are learning what they need to succeed in life, those headed to college, those looking for vocational training and those with special needs.
  
5. In 2025, the natural beauty and recreational opportunities are flourishing. All the new commercial development has not impinged on this valued asset. Residents and visitors alike are actively enjoying the numerous, well marked trails that connect carefully preserved open spaces with the river, the town and the shore. Use of the river has increased. The beaches and dunes are stabilized and enjoyed by residents and visitors.
  
6. In spite of the growth in Saco's business development and down town, the city has remained affordable for a diverse group of residents. For several people, that means keeping the taxes low.



Some suggest working with Biddeford to combine services and generate savings or making it easier to build affordable housing.

7. In 2025 “City Hall is full of people who are passionate about and invested in Saco”. Citizens are actively engaged in public affairs – well informed, speaking up, volunteering and running for public office. “Saco will be a progressive and visionary leader in Southern Maine and New England”.

### **Next steps:**

It is now in the hands of the Council to take this information from your constituents, the residents and business people of Saco, and create a vision statement that you believe should be a guiding star for the City’s work for the next decade. With that vision, you can identify the key priorities that you think the city should focus on for the next decade. Then, as you move forward with your regular council work you can ask: What should we be doing to reach that vision? How does the item before us help us reach our vision? Is the item before us a high priority or a low priority measured by how well it helps Saco towards its vision?

At the Council meeting on Monday, February 2, 2015, the report will be presented and, hopefully, accepted by the Council. In a Council workshop on Monday, February 9, 2015, the Council will be asked to write its own vision statement and set its priorities for 2025.

### **Appendices:**

#### I. Summaries

- a. Summary of Themes for all 12 focus groups
- b. Summary of Themes from the Community Meeting
- c. Summary of Themes from all Survey Questions with number of mentions

#### II. Summaries with detail included

- a. Summary of Themes for all 12 Focus Groups with detail from the notes
- b. Summary of Themes from the Community Meeting with the notes from full group

#### III. Complete notes

- a. Complete notes from all 12 focus groups
- b. Complete notes from the Community Meeting including small group sessions
- c. Complete collation of all survey responses



- d. Notes from the meetings of the Saco Vision Process Steering Committee
- e. List of Saco Vision Process Steering Committee

IV. Report on the activities of the Saco Bridge 2025 project