

## Section 5 : ARTS AND CULTURE

---

The City of Saco has long partnered with the City of Biddeford in promoting the arts and culture of both communities. The cities have walkable downtowns within minutes of each other, repurposed mill buildings that are becoming home for new residents and businesses, and a rich heritage with strong Franco-American influences.

A vital component to a thriving community's downtown is ensuring that local arts and culture have a living, tangible presence. This chapter will focus on the links 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 ethnic and cultural histories & profiles compiled by a folklorist, as well as an arts and culture inventory. .

In 2005, through another joint effort between Biddeford and Saco, the Twin Cities Cultural Planning Committee was created. 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. Unfortunately, the Council disbanded not long afterward.

In 2013, Engine, a Biddeford non-profit organization founded several years prior 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 the Heart of Biddeford, Saco Maine Street (formerly Saco Spirit), the Biddeford+Saco Chamber, City Theater, Arts@UNE, the Biddeford Mills Museum, Societe St. Jean de Bienfaisance, La Kermesse, McArthur Library, Saco Museum, and Dyer Library. To maintain an active profile in the community, BSACA keeps an active Facebook account 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 and one of the general public living in both communities), three focus group forums, and 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 shared rich history of the two cities as well as 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 those focal points and this shared 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 short term (within that year, 2006 and the next two years, 2007-2008), and long term (beyond 2009) actions. For example, some of 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 Saco Museum, the Dyer Library, Saco Main Street, the Stone Soup Artisans Cooperative, Thornton Academy, and Painting with a Twist all take part in bringing cultural events to Saco. For example, the Museum brought recognition to Saco through a curated needlework exhibition that was reported on by the New York Times! The Museum also holds events that feature docents costumed in historic apparel and exhibits that change with the seasons. Concurrently, each year the Museum holds the Festival of Trees during the holiday season. Not to be outdone, the Library holds art shows featuring art done by students, and recently held a Harry Potter-themed event for children. The Library also offers classes such as watercolor painting and other arts centered instruction regularly. 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 beyond their current budget.

Saco Main Street also holds many events throughout the year, such as: the Holiday Festival and Parade of Lights, the Pumpkin Harvest Festival, the Sidewalk Art Festival, and the Classic Car Show. Also held during the summers of 2016 and 2017, the “Adirondacks on Main”, which featured Adirondack chairs painted by artists on display along Main Street, were auctioned off at the end of the summer to benefit future Saco Maine Street events. Other successful events Saco Maine Street helps facilitate have been: Music in the Park”ing Lot concerts (which were held between the Dyer Library and Saco Museum buildings), and some seasonal projects such as planting flowering window boxes along Main Street. Saco Main Street has partnered with its sister organization, The Heart of Biddeford, to sponsor River Jam, an event in September that features stand up paddle board and kayak races (and other kinds of family fun!) during the day and musical performers at night.

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.

Thornton Academy contributes to the arts and culture of Saco by offering 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.

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 can be found during the day.

## C. THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN

The City of Saco has compiled an impressive array of plans and reports in the last ten 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 flow of 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 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, people tend to slow down, linger, and explore.

Besides a walkable downtown, Saco has many valuable, existing, natural assets such as beaches, parks, the Saco 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 will foster an even greater sense of connection to place. These same spaces, especially those within the downtown or nearby, can also provide gathering places for music, performances, story-telling, reunions, and/or get-togethers. Such welcoming spaces to gather add to a downtown's sense of vitality simply by letting people know that those spaces exist purely for them, their friends, and their families to enjoy.

When planning for attractive, pedestrian-friendly streets and green spaces in a downtown, especially given the ever warmer summer temperatures, it is important to provide ample shade for constituents and visitors alike. Urban trees, chosen for their adaptability to urban conditions, can provide a number of benefits. To name just a few: cooling of streets, sidewalks and buildings, stormwater management, cleaner air and water, beautification, and shade. Studies done in large communities, such as New York City, have also found that people are more attracted to buildings with trees near them in a downtown environment. Other studies have shown that building values are positively influenced by street trees. While Saco is currently a Tree City USA member, which indicates that the City has made a commitment to its trees, it is a challenge 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, options to enhance green spaces and streets include shrubs and perennials, which, provide many of the same benefits as trees, 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, which can be found at this web address: [www.themuseuminthestreets.com](http://www.themuseuminthestreets.com).

One of the other things that the focus groups in the Bridge 2025 report wanted more of were in-town restaurants. 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 as the national movement of Eat Local / Buy Local has taken off. Eating out is one of our national pastimes 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 can host restaurants that do such items with a twist.

As of this writing, two new restaurants, both located just steps from Main Street, have opened in the past several months. One of them, Cia Cafe, offers coffee, sandwiches, local ice cream and featuring local art—and 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 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 is hard to accommodate in Saco. Some communities have recognized that people also like to shop after going out to dinner and have shops that stay open late on weekend 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 look more attractive to restaurateurs looking to open restaurants, to other business people looking to start small performing arts venues, or even to existing business owners thinking about expanding their hours to meet the newfound and burgeoning need.

#### **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, which goes against all studies done on livability and the economic impact of such arts & culture ventures.
- Saco has a pleasant walkable downtown – something many communities envy - but there are few gathering places or green spaces in or near downtown, which again goes against where the research is pointing us.
- 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 on Cutts Street and Mill Building #4 on Saco Island) Saco has an opportunity to engage those “feet on the street” and keep them attending local performances/shows, visiting downtown shops, and eating locally.

According to the Bridge 2025 report, Saco residents cherish their city’s events and are eager for more. With Saco Main Street being the main promoter of downtown events, the City should explore partnering more with Saco Main Street to bring additional events to the downtown area.

