

APPENDIX J – Part 2: ARTS AND CULTURE

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 businesses.

A vital component to a thriving community’s downtown is ensuring that the arts and community culture have a living, tangible presence there. This section will focus on the linkages between Saco’s downtown and the community’s creative culture and how these connections benefit Saco.

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 by 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. The group disbanded a year later.

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 on 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.