

TWIN CITIES CULTURAL PLAN

APPENDIX A – NOTES FROM FOCUS GROUPS

SESSION #1: ARTIST FOCUS GROUP #1

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2005, 3PM

PARTICIPANTS

Iona Desmond – Painter, Vice President of Saco Bay Artists, retired art teacher
David Fuller – Owner of lighting fixture design/manufacturing business
Renee Hibbard – Glass jewelry/mosaic artist and wholesaler
Caleb Johnson – Co-owner of architecture firm, oil painter, real estate investor
Janet Manyan – Painter, instructor at MECA
Sue Murphy – Artist, organizer of regional “support group” for artists
Jessica Peck – Co-owner of Cool Coffee, actress, filmmaker
Derek Preble – Furniture builder, prospective retail store owner

What’s Good About Biddeford/Saco?

- Tremendous infrastructure of historic buildings and character
- A lot of individual artists, craftspeople are around
- Great location—between Portland and Portsmouth, on the turnpike, near the ocean
- A lot of cheap space for artists...for now

What Needs Improvement?

- Many creative people go unnoticed—e.g. Common Connection Club
- Downtown Biddeford’s potential is much greater than its current state
- There is very little coordination among creative people—each person has to be an entrepreneur right now
- Our self-image is terrible
- Bad odors—between MERC and sewer plant downtowns smell like “a dumpster or a toilet”

What Resources are Needed?

- Need to have an organized Networking Group to connect businesses and artists with
 - Keep a database of available companies and resources such as support services (printing, document production, shipping, web development)
 - Represent Twin Cities to arts communities in larger cities like Portland and Boston
- Smaller-scale theater facilities and groups
 - City Theater is a great resource but it’s too big for most productions and is often not available
 - Crossroads model is great but needs to be extended into Biddeford—more programs for kids
 - Space for small, independent theater—Reny’s building?
- Image building and marketing

- Should have PR “spinmeister” to develop an identity and sell it
- Need to have good quality and highly visible public art—not just kids’ murals

What Communities Have Done This Already?

- Providence—Wickenden Street is “street of art.” It happened because of RISD and Brown and due to free rent and tax breaks for artists
- Portland—Art Museum led the charge, supported by Portland College of Art (now MECA). Started with using vacant storefronts in Old Port to display local art
- Portsmouth—started with upscale restaurants—people came downtown and saw potential of the old buildings. BUT, it’s gotten too successful and is turning over to chain stores—underscores importance of controlling real estate.
- Woonsocket, RI—very gritty mill town, has Museum of Work and Industry, celebrating local industrial history, rather than trying to bury it.
- SoHo—artists salvaged the architecture, amenities followed, but restaurants/coffee shops/galleries followed

What Opportunities Exist?

- Main Street Biddeford has potential to be a destination for high-end home furnishings and art objects: kitchens, furniture, painting, sculpture
 - Storefronts on Main Street are the city’s identity—the mills are just support space/”sweatshops” (just like it’s always been).
- Factory Island is poised to be major regional destination. 1980s vision was for restaurant, hotel, marina, shopping, etc. There is no reason why that can’t still happen.
- UNE needs to have a presence downtown and City should offer incentives for it to come in
- One coordinated group needs to come together to focus on a single catalyst project
 - Acquiring several buildings at one time for use by artists?

What are Visions for Arts & Culture in Area?

- Dramatic historic walking tours
- Avant garde “guerilla” theater that uses multiple locations throughout cities
- Larger film festival, building on success of Mill Dance
- Steal artists and businesses from Portland and Portsmouth
- Use vacant storefronts to make arts and culture more visible to the public
- Hold monthly forum to exchange ideas and move the location around
- Revive living history fiber arts exhibit at Factory Island—celebrate mill history
- Create a major “iconic” attraction
 - Put in amusement ride in underground mill tunnels
 - Tram ride across the river
 - New “high design” bridge between two cities
- Plans need to be in plain English and feature visual aids that people can understand
- Develop identity of downtown arts district, either a section or all of it
 - New Haven
 - Rockland (maybe we should “rent a Wyeth!”)
- Create arts map of the area
- Develop local version of Percent for Art—all new big box development must contribute 1% of its budget to public art

Comments on Arts Council

- Definitely needed, but mission is not clear
- Needs to come out of the box with very specific goals—don't try to be everything to everyone
- Combine arts and business interests—do not fill the board with only artists
- Use culture as economic development engine—creative economy model
- Help artists sell their work!

SESSION #2: ARTIST FOCUS GROUP #2 WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2005, 7PM

PARTICIPANTS

Phil Grime – Antiques dealer, former director of Arts Council in Stowe, VT

Andrew Horvat – Professional musician, UNE media services employee, union roadie

Renee O'Neil – Director of City Theater, actress, choreographer

What's Good About Biddeford/Saco?

- A lot of local talent exists
- Incredible local history and built evidence of it (mills, downtowns)
- Strong local institutions and organizations
- Strong arts programs in local schools

What Needs Improvement?

- Most local artists are not appreciated by local population
- Very small market for high-end goods within community
- Very little coordination right now
- Artists/musicians tend to be self-centered—it is hard to force them to work together

What Resources are Needed?

- Dialogues were built during cultural assessment in 1990s, but no vehicle exists for that today—it was very valuable at the time
- Arts center/arts council provides focus for whole community
- Funding—it's hard to push the creative envelope when you depend on funding from local banks, businesses, individuals

What Communities Have Done This Already?

- Stowe, VT – very affluent community, huge volunteer effort created a self-supporting organization that raised money through art fair, Taste of Stowe, dues
- St. Johnsbury, VT – brought culture to rural community—local concerts aimed at kids by noted classical musicians. Built appreciation for the arts
- Doesn't have to be a “hotspot” issue—in Germany, there are few cultural centers, but the level of cultural appreciation is high throughout the country

What Opportunities Exist?

- Think long-range—arts events cannot exist in a vacuum
 - Shaker exhibit was great, but it came and went in three months. If it had been around for a whole year, all local arts groups could have created an annual theme around Shaker arts and culture—raises whole profile
- Develop local icons and disseminate to kids
 - Print postcards of most noted items in Saco Museum collection and distribute to all 4th graders—they can identify with what it means to be from Saco
- Define what culture means
 - It used to signify ethnicity and geography—now we often use it to signify art objects and performances
- Celebrate current industry, not just industrial history
 - Our industrial jobs are in “invisible” industrial parks, not visible mills. Could do tours of today’s industrial businesses for schoolkids
 - Today’s fishermen don’t live in Camp Ellis—changing economics have forced them to live inland, though they still make their living on the coast
- University presence is critical. Approach both UNE and USM for arts partnerships
- Move beyond MERC—it just leads to negativity and division
- Plug into civic groups like Rotary

What are Visions for Arts & Culture in Area?

- Develop a theme each year and have all organizations plug into it
 - Coordinate events at museum and theater with school curricula
- Choose iconic images that symbolize the community and use as part of effort
 - Steeples, clocktowers
 - Personalities
 - Art objects
 - Cultural groups—Abenaki, French, etc.
- Grow multidimensional arts scene
 - Avoid becoming “furniture town” or “music town”—it makes you more vulnerable
- Work together, don’t fall into the “circular firing squad” mentality like Portland did. All arts and cultural groups should share similar goals—they are not in competition
- We are just stewards of our culture
 - Honor the past, deal with the present, pass on for the future

Comments on Arts Council

- Would provide the equalization that doesn’t exist in Portland—all groups share its resources
- Balance arts/non-arts representation—make sure money people are represented
- Provide networking/forum opportunities
- Possibly combine resources from existing organizations
 - Do Saco Spirit and Heart of Biddeford do the same thing?
 - Are these organizations just aimed at downtown redevelopment, or is there more to it—are they really arts groups?
- Use creative economy model—it forces unorthodox partnerships that are for the betterment of the community

SESSION #3: CIVIC LEADERS FOCUS GROUP

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2005, 10AM

PARTICIPANTS

Will Armitage – Director, Biddeford-Saco Area Economic Development Corporation

Lynn Bivens – Assistant Director, McArthur Library

Bernard Featherman – CEO, Biddeford-Saco Chamber of Commerce

David Flood – Publisher, Mainely Newspapers

Ann Marie Lane – PR office, Southern Maine Medical Center

Don Lauzier – Vice President, Saco and Biddeford Savings Institution

Wallace Nutting – Mayor, City of Biddeford

Doug Sanford – Owner of North Dam Mill complex

Greg Shambarger – Student Activities Coordinator, University of New England

Steven Sobol – Owner of Riverdam Millyard

Rachael Weyand – Director, Heart of Biddeford

What's Good About Biddeford/Saco?

- Cities have rich culture and history
- Mill buildings are already becoming centers of creative energy
- There's nowhere else in Maine like this area—population center with historic mills located on Turnpike
- Arts resources—Saco Museum, City Theater, libraries, dance studios, etc.
- La Kermesse is great example of using culture as an economic development tool

What Needs Improvement?

- Arts and culture have little visibility in community
- Artists lack time, space and money to make a big difference on their own
- Three communities (Biddeford, Saco, OOB) are really one community, but they have never functioned that way—it's inefficient
- Arts groups are disjointed—each comes to banks individually for separate activities
- Development by highways doesn't benefit community—money flows directly out of state
 - Downtown development keeps the money local
- Terrible self-image
 - People outside of the community have a much better image of us than we realize

What Resources are Needed?

- Housing and live/work space for artists is in very short supply—cities need to find ways to encourage development of these units
- Many artists earn their money in the summertime but need to have employment during the rest of the year
- More collaboration between city governments would improve image, build jobs and even lower taxes
- Need to have cohesive effort between both cities that focuses on very specific accomplishments—don't do 100 small projects
- Mount a marketing effort to build an overall identity for the area

- Funding is needed, but economic development groups don't know where to look for arts funding—need more assistance from experienced arts funding people
- Staff help and funding are needed to help artists sell their products

What Communities Have Done This Already?

- Willamstown, MA has done annual themes
 - Did fin-de-siecle Vienna theme in 2000 in theaters, galleries, museums, festivals
- Lewiston-Auburn has collaborated with regional identity for years
 - City of Lewiston owns Bates Mill—subsidizes operations and keeps rents affordable
- Portsmouth did...but shows why control of real estate is so critical
- Rollinsford, NH has used mill space to capture those fleeing Portsmouth's rising prices
- Fort Point arts community in Boston—hundreds of artists in former industrial area
 - Has weekend-long open studio event, draws thousands of visitors
 - Is now getting too expensive...may be opportunity for Biddeford to recruit tenants

What Opportunities Exist?

- SMMC has 1,000 employees and sponsors “life-work” program aimed at introducing staff to opportunities for things to do in the community
- UNE—estimates that students only spend 15% of time in class and is looking for ways to get them involved in more activities beyond the campus
- UNE is starting an art department, but it lacks space and resources
 - Could be an opportunity for a downtown presence—housing, studios, performance space, classrooms
- Coordinate downtown businesses to offer “packages” to customers
 - Combination tickets for dining and theater
 - Student discounts for UNE—perhaps using meal points?
- Annual theme for arts and culture could have broad appeal
 - Have schools design curricula around themes
- Many residents go to Portland for arts, culture, dining—need to sell our own residents on the value of what we have here
- There are public funds available
 - Biddeford's CDBG program has \$200,000 for mill redevelopment planned for 2007—can it be moved up the priority list to 2006?
 - Biddeford is looking to expand New Markets tax credit district
 - Biddeford is considering massive downtown TIF district
 - Saco already has TIF district on Factory Island
 - BSAEDC board is willing to put money forward to support arts and culture, but needs to find the right way to do it
- UNE has a lot of interested students, but little money or support
 - Business/arts groups can fund and work with student groups, which can provide the labor for arts events

What are Visions for Arts & Culture in Area?

- Business groups provide network of support for arts/cultural efforts
 - Management, marketing, finance training

- Funding for equipment
 - Mentoring
- Create image/brand of cities as a cultural destination
 - “SoHo on the Saco”
 - Trade on the mill history and building stock
 - Develop uniform, attractive signage for both downtown areas
- Create ways for artists to build synergy—think big
- Maximize collaboration among all types of interest groups—artists, businesses, nonprofits, local audience

Comments on Arts Council

- Individuals can't get access to most grants—Arts Council would be conduit for such funding
- Council can be conduit for building local image
- Needs to foster networking and educational programs for arts and business interests