

TWIN CITIES CULTURAL PLAN

NOTES FROM 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!