

TWIN CITIES CULTURAL PLAN

NOTES FROM CIVIC LEADERS FOCUS GROUP

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2005, 10AM

PARTICIPANTS

Will Armitage – Director, Biddeford-Saco Area Economic Development Corporation
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Don Lauzier – Vice President, Saco and Biddeford Savings Institution
Wallace Nutting – Mayor, City of Biddeford
Doug Sanford – Owner of Pepperell Mill complex
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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