

2017 AUGUSTA CITY COUNCIL GOALS AND ACTIONS

(final draft February 2, 2017)



INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, January 28, 2017, members of the Augusta City Council, staff, and partner organizations met in the Augusta Civic Center for a 6-hour goal-setting session

All of the goals within are supported by a majority of members of the Council.

2016 SUMMARY

Goal-setting has been an annual event for the Augusta City Council since 1998. In preparation for the 2017 retreat, Manager Bill Bridgeo summarized what was accomplished in the last year in response to the goals set in the 2016 retreat. Those achievements included:

- Stepped up local drug enforcement efforts by assigning a local officer to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency for an extended period of time; executing 18 search warrants where arrests were made; and conducting 4 Hot Spot events last summer.
- Stepped up drug prevention efforts by participating in public forums; increasing DARE offerings; and assisting in grant applications for treatment options
- Pursued long-term economic development options through the Economic and Workforce Development Committee's meetings with the DECD Commissioner, developer Kevin Mattson, Richard Parkhurst, a Winthrop visioning group, and the Secretary of the Veterans Administration
- Improved public safety through the construction of the North Augusta Fire Station and purchase of a new ladder truck
- Promoted immediate economic development through the use of restricted (TIF) funds to assist J.S. McCarthy Printers to expand; renovate the Hartford Fire Station; redevelop 275-287 Water Street for market-rate housing and commercial uses; assist Performance Food Group to remain in Augusta and expand; and improve streets and sidewalks city-wide
- Opened the spectacular new Lithgow Library addition
- Opened new affordable senior housing at a rehabilitated Hodgkins School
- Achieved an "age-friendly" designation from the Maine Chapter of the AARP
- Helped hungry children get healthy meals through the establishment of a Kids Pantry at the Buker Community Center
- Studied, adopted, and implemented a property maintenance ordinance; an historic preservation ordinance; and a "complete streets" policy
- Committed funds to the restoration of the Colonial Theater, contingent on the ability of the group to raise sufficient private money to proceed with the rehabilitation
- Identified and funded improvements to the Mill Park

Every year the City of Augusta faces critical issues that were not anticipated at the time of the Council retreat. 2016 was no exception. Issues of bedbugs, quarry blasting, and the redevelopment of St. Mark's Church took extensive time in 2016. In the coming year, more work needs to be done on

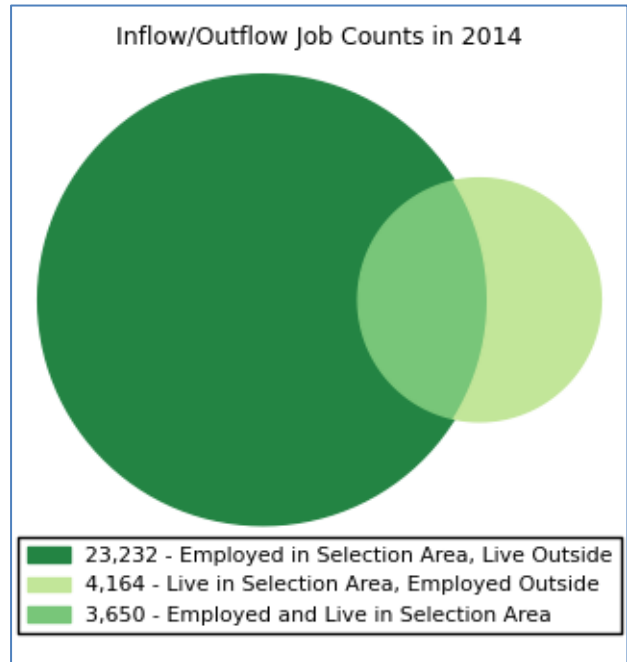
quarry blasting and on working with the faith community to identify appropriate places for social services.

With this as background, here are the goals the City Council has set for 2017.

GOAL A: FIX OLD HOUSES, BUILD NEW HOUSES, ATTRACT NEW RESIDENTS

There are roughly 28,000 people who work in the city of Augusta. Of these, about 23,000, or 86.4%, live outside of the city, and commute in to work every day (see chart). This proportion has grown from 79.9% in 2002. If the 2002 proportion still held, Augusta would have 1,750 more workers and their families. More families in Augusta would mean better neighborhoods, more children in the schools, a stronger tax base, and a broader group of volunteers.

To attract middle class families, Augusta must improve the quality of its housing stock, and stimulate the construction of new housing to meet the demand from those who don't want to live in, and fix up, older homes.



Action A1. Develop a strategy to rehabilitate existing older housing.

This year the Augusta Housing Authority and City of Augusta will implement a multi-family rehabilitation program using state Community Development Block Grant funds. This is a positive first step, but more needs to be considered. Can funds raised from selling tax-acquired property be used to supplement rehabilitation funds? Can local banks provide below-market rate funds as part of their Community Reinvestment Act strategies? Can the Augusta Housing Authority's development corporation be a vehicle for buying, fixing, and selling housing back into the private market? These and other options should be considered as part of a City/Housing Authority rehabilitation strategy.

Action A2. In conjunction with the business community, create a marketing program to sell the virtues of living and working and playing in Augusta and Central Maine.

The City of Augusta should partner with other organizations such as the Augusta Board of Trade, the Kennebec Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Kennebec Valley Board of Realtors, and the Kennebec Valley Tourism Council, to design a marketing program for Central Maine. One possible theme for such marketing is to promote a "green" lifestyle – emphasizing the leadership of the City on environmental issues, such as walking and biking trails, recycling, alternative energy, and so forth.

Action A3. Explore ways to incentivize the development of infrastructure for residential projects, in ways similar (but not identical) to business development.

The City of Augusta is highly skilled at using tax incentive and grant programs to stimulate economic development investment. This same skill – using different tax incentive and grant tools – should be used to incentive private developers to build market-rate residential housing within the city.

Action A4. Monitor the implementation of three new codes passed in 2016 designed to improve housing quality: historic preservation, property maintenance, and yard sales.

A lot of thought and discussion went into the creation and adoption of ordinances to preserve housing quality in Augusta. This year the City Manager should provide quarterly reports to the Council on the progress of implementing these ordinances.

GOAL B: PROMOTE A HEALTHY, DIVERSE, THRIVING POPULATION

The aging of the population; the in-migration to the city of people from different cultural backgrounds; the continuing scourge of drug addiction; poverty and hunger among children and their families; an observed increase in incivility among schoolchildren and their parents – all present human challenges for the city. Goals to address these issues include:

Action B1. Step up activities to ensure that drug addiction treatment is available to residents, including the consideration of funding of interim and gap treatment programs. The City has participated in drug addiction forums and discussions, and has stepped up its enforcement activities. However, more needs to be done to ensure that treatment is available in a timely fashion when people need it. More federal and state grant funds for this purpose may be available this year, which will help. City staff should examine this issue, and make recommendations to Council about how to improve the availability of treatment services for Augusta residents in need.



Action B2. Create a small childhood hunger working group to continue to make progress in eliminating hunger in Augusta. With the help of local church groups, teachers, nonprofits, and city staff, more healthy food has been made available to young people and low-income residents of subsidized housing in the past year. To coordinate future progress, a working group should be established that would include a city councilor, a school board member, the Augusta Food Bank Director, a school department staff designee, and city staff designee.

Action B3. Support efforts to create an immigration center or welcoming service.

There is a growing immigrant population in the city. In the long run, this is a healthy development, because new families will help the economy and enrich local culture. In the short term, the experience can be disruptive to the families and community alike unless there is planning. The City should work with nonprofit groups who are assisting refugees and immigrants to ensure that the newcomers are integrated into the community. One possibility area of collaboration would be in the establishment of an immigration center to coordinate services to immigrants.

Action B4. Facilitate efforts of the faith community to find a location for consolidated social services in the center of Augusta that does not have a negative impact on surrounding neighborhoods.

Over the past few months, discussions among the faith community, neighbors, and city officials, have created great progress towards finding a good place for locating services such as the warming center and food kitchen in the center of Augusta, near services, but not causing neighborhood conflicts. The goal is for these efforts to succeed in 2017.

Action B5. Explore ways to implement the recommendations of the Augusta Age Friendly Advisory Committee.

The Maine AARP declared Augusta to be an “age-friendly community” in 2016. Over the past several months, a local committee has been meeting and developing recommendations to help improve the quality of life for seniors in Augusta. These recommendations will come to the City Council in 2017.

Action B6. Meet with County officials – manager, sheriff, commissioners, district attorney – to discuss placement procedures for discharged prisoners. Along the same lines, meet with state officials from Corrections and Health and Human Services to discuss placement procedures for discharged prisoners and mental health patients. The county jail and Riverview Hospital discharges their clients into the Augusta housing market. In addition, the state Corrections Department gives bus tickets to Augusta from discharged prisoners in Warren. City officials need to be reassured that appropriate procedures and funding is in place to support these people. In addition, the County and State should be asked to financially support the City’s efforts to serve these groups. These are the topics for the proposed meetings.

Action B7. Through leadership by example, promote civility in interpersonal relationships among citizens, and especially among young people, in Augusta.

School officials report an unprecedented increase in physical and verbal abuse among children in the early grades in school – in some cases matched by abusive behavior from their parents. City leaders need to be sure they are modeling and supporting appropriate behavior in schools and public places.

GOAL C: ENHANCE THE LOOK AND FEEL OF AUGUSTA

Part of the strategy to entice commuters to live in Augusta must be to increase the attractiveness of the places those commuters drive by every day on the way to work – the gateway roads of Augusta. Here are some strategies to enhance Augusta’s attractiveness.



Action C1. Create a Public Art Commission designed to promote public art in the downtown, in the gateways, and in other locations in the city.

As a capitol city, Augusta has a long and distinguished history to celebrate. As a city with a college that provides degrees in art, and a state arts commission office, Augusta has many creative people living and working in the area. As a city with many parks, trails, and public spaces, Augusta has many places that are appropriate for public art. The Augusta Council will create a public art commission to identify opportunities and to generate resources to support public art throughout the city.

Action C2. Explore ways to expand the “Adopt-A-Garden” program in order to improve the appearance of public places, particularly in gateway areas.

Augusta has key entryways to the city along Western Avenue, Mount Vernon Avenue, and at Riverside and Route 3. These would be good places for attractive gardens. Since there is not enough city staff to maintain such gardens, one solution might be to have garden areas “adopted” by individuals, clubs, and businesses, who would take responsibility for care and upkeep. However, volunteer efforts need supervision and guidance, and right now there is no city staff available to oversee such a program. City staff will explore the costs of developing such a program and report back to the Council during the budget process.

Action C3. Enhance city gateways through a combination of attractive sidewalks, median strips, signs, landscaping, and clean up.

This is similar to the recommendation above, but addresses the city infrastructure involved – medians, sidewalks, signs, landscaping. This also involves costs. City staff will present ideas on how to achieve this goal, along with the costs, during the budget process.

Action C4. Create an Augusta Trails map, and have the Conservation Commission create a master plan for connecting trails within the city and to trails outside of the city.

These activities are already underway. The promotion of trails can be part of the promotion of the city overall as a “green” place to live.

GOAL D: CONTINUE TO SUPPORT BUSINESS GROWTH

This is a longstanding City goal. Business growth brings more property taxes, more jobs, and higher incomes for Augusta residents. The goals here are largely to continue efforts to redevelop downtown and the riverfront, as well as to promote other business zones.

Kennebec Locke image



Action D1. Create an RFQ (Request for Qualifications), and work with the winning developer, to develop new housing and commercial space, and new infrastructure, at The Kennebec Locke at Head Tide. A developer is inquiring about possible development at the old Statler Mill site, now known as Kennebec Locke. To encourage, and attract even wider interest, the City will issue an RFQ to identify a development partner for the first phase of Kennebec Locke development.

Action D2. Meet with the Board of Trade and create a fresh marketing strategy for Riggs Brook. It has been a longstanding goal of the City and the Augusta Board of Trade to attract new development to the Riggs Brook neighborhood, near the third bridge exit at Route 3. The cost of utility extensions has proven to be an obstacle. To move the issue along, this year the City and Board of Trade should develop a marketing strategy for Riggs Brook, in the hope that once a developer and project emerges, the public investment in utilities can start to make economic sense.

Action D3. Explore the creation of a loop bus service connecting the Capitol complex, the Library, downtown, Fort Western, and the AMHI campus of state government. The capital of Vermont, in Montpelier, sits in the middle of downtown, and downtown stores and restaurants benefit from the shopping of state employees and visitors. Here in Augusta, the downtown is invisible from the capital. A regular and frequent van service connecting the downtown to state offices would reduce traffic congestion and increase the marketability of downtown businesses.

Action D4. Explore the conversion of Water Street from one-way to two-way traffic. Many Maine downtowns, most recently Waterville, have begun to plan a transition from one-way traffic to two-way traffic. The logic is that one-way streets move traffic through too quickly, and discourages pedestrians and window browsing. It is necessary to decide on whether or not to proceed with this change before scheduled improvements are needed on adjacent Commercial Street. City staff will research the costs of planning for such a transition, and present options to the Council this year.

Action D5. Support the renovation of the Colonial Theater. The renovation of the Colonial Theater, long a goal of the Augusta City Council, is moving closer to implementation. A concentrated private sector fundraising effort is now underway. Last year, the City made a financial commitment to the project, which would be released in the event that private fundraising is successful. This year, City officials will continue to cheerlead and promote the project to private donors and grant-giving organizations.

Action D6. Continue to work with businesses to locate and expand in the downtown, at the Arsenal, at the recently vacated Sears Building, and at all other locations in the city. There are many other development sites in Augusta besides downtown and Riggs Brook. City staff will continue to work with all businesses interested in investing and expanding anywhere in the city.

GOAL E: MAINTAIN EFFICIENT AND RESPONSIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Action E1. As part of the 2017 budget process, develop a Fiscal Integrity Plan for handling the drawdown of fund balance accounts for the City and Schools over the coming five years.

Cuts in state aid over the last six years are increasingly pressing local government finances. Both city government and the school department have coped, in part, by drawing down existing fund balances. But as those fund balances dwindle and eventually disappear, that strategy cannot continue for long. This year City Staff will provide a five-year overview of fund balance choices to City Councilors as part of the annual budget process.



Action E2. Initiate the Comprehensive Plan update. The existing Comprehensive Plan is about ten years old. It is time to revisit the plan, the goals, and actions, to develop a strategy for the coming decade. As part of the effort, residents will consider new possibilities like the creation of an “arts district” in the city. The City Council will support City staff as they solicit public input in 2017.

Action E3. Prepare ordinance revisions to deal with marijuana growth, distribution, and sale.

This issue arises from the 2016 state referendum victory for legalizing recreational marijuana use. City staff will develop a regulatory approach and activities to deal with the new situation.

Action E4. Resolve blasting issue.

The ongoing problem between the quarry and its neighbors must be resolved in 2017.

Action E5. Hartford Station project

This will create a new fire station and rehabilitated historic building at the entry to downtown.

Action E6. Coordinate with other local elected officials.

Many critical financial decisions must be made in the coming year, and close coordination with partner organizations is needed. This year the Council will:

- Meet with state legislative delegation monthly during the legislative session.
- Work with School District to create Future Vision, to market Cony to tuition students, and to coordinate city and school budgets.