

2018 AUGUSTA CITY COUNCIL GOALS AND ACTIONS

(February 5 2018)



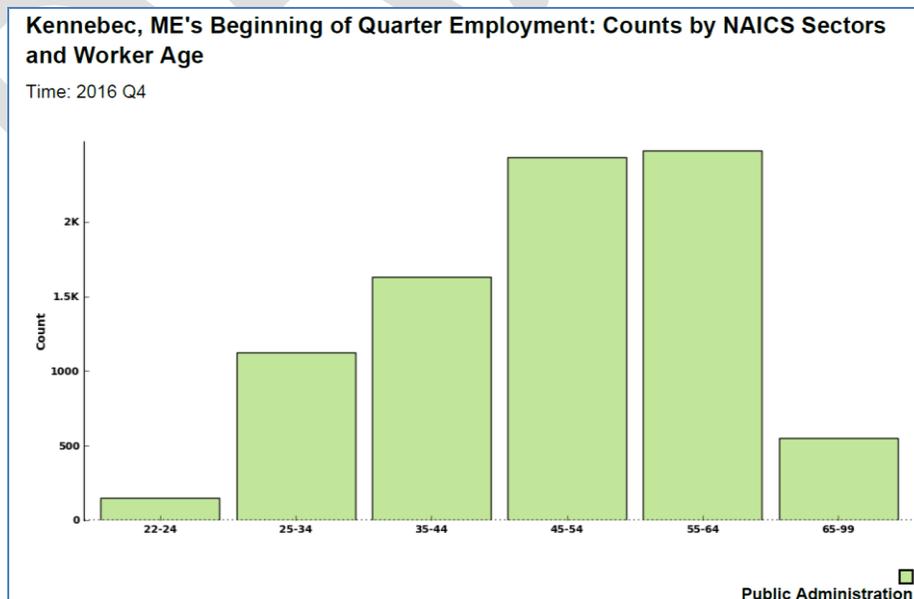
INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, January 20, 2018, members of the Augusta City Council, staff, and partner organizations met in the Augusta Civic Center for a 6-hour goal-setting session. Following a write-up of the session by staff, the Council met in a workshop on xxx, 2018, and approved these goals and actions for the coming year.

BACKGROUND

2017 was a very successful year in the City of Augusta. New residential development at subdivisions like Fieldstone Place, and new businesses openings such as Cushnoc Brewing Co. in the downtown, have picked up to the point that the Development Department is being forced to reorganize itself to deal with all of the permitting. City government has earned plaudits from area observers in recent weeks for the quality of city services related to street plowing, flood preparation, and drug crime prevention. The unemployment rate for the City of Augusta was 2.4% in December, 2017, below both the state and national level.

But good times also bring new problems. City department heads report that it is difficult to attract and retain qualified staff for both part-time and full-time work. As in all of Maine's economy, the public administration sector of Kennebec County's workforce is aging (see chart below). The largest cohort is the 55-64 age group, people who are heading toward retirement in the next ten years. The need to be able to recruit and retain talented replacements is critical for the quality of future City services.



Both municipal government and the school department have experienced staff leaving for nearby communities where the pay is better. The City is renegotiating several public employee contracts this year, and creating a more competitive work environment will be a major goal of those negotiations.

But pay raises will create fiscal challenges. There are positives for City revenues in 2018: more school funding from state government, more new development on the tax rolls. There are also negatives: excise tax revenues from car sales are expected to drop off, and quirks in the school funding formula may diminish how much Augusta actually gains from the increase in state spending. There are also expenditure-side challenges in meeting future capital needs for items such as a new police station and Civic Center upgrades; for maintaining the current high level of snow plowing quality; and for providing adequate fire staffing.

The City legislative delegation plays an important role in supporting City services. Priorities for the delegation in 2018 include:

- Supporting state funding for a new elementary school
- Ensuring that changes to the school funding formula to encourage regional cooperation do not penalize service center communities like Augusta
- Support for LD 1738 that allows cafes to serve alcohol on protected outside street areas
- Ensuring that the new marijuana bill has provisions that share potential tax revenues with host communities
- Opposing the Governor's bill on tax foreclosures that would turn city staff into housing counselors
- Making sure that the Medicaid expansion takes place, which is important for funding services to young substance abusers
- Opposing changes to the pricing formula for excise taxes which would hurt municipal revenues
- Addressing childhood hunger (support for Joyce Maker bill)
- Support for sex offender bill offered by Matt Pouliot that prohibits sex offenders from taking photos of young people and posting them online without the family's permission
- Support for bills that might increase state funding for new housing
- Support for the release of job training funds

With this as background, here are the City's goals for 2018.

GOAL A: PROMOTING HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT

The City of Augusta's population has been stagnant for many years, even as Kennebec County was growing. In the near future, Kennebec County is not projected to grow – so the challenge for Augusta to attract new families will be even harder.

However, the appeal of urban living is much greater now than it has been for many decades. The two major forces in the coming housing market – downsizing baby boomers and young millennials – both have similar interests. They want low-maintenance housing, open floor plans, energy efficiency,

walkability, high-speed internet access, and access to night life and cultural activities. One difference is that millennials are interested in smaller spaces, including “tiny homes,” and are open to walk-up living – where downsizing boomers want more space, and mostly first-floor living

The City of Augusta has *land* available for development that meets these needs. But much of its *existing old housing stock* is not that attractive to these two groups. Therefore, new housing construction is an important part of the City’s strategy.

NEW INITIATIVES

Action A1. Accelerate infrastructure development of Kennebec Locke.



Kennebec Locke has the potential to serve both millennials and downsizing baby boomers. It is near to downtown, near to trails, near to jobs and services, and on the water. It is an absolutely unique site in central Maine. The new project proposed by the Augusta Housing Authority (see photo) is a first step.

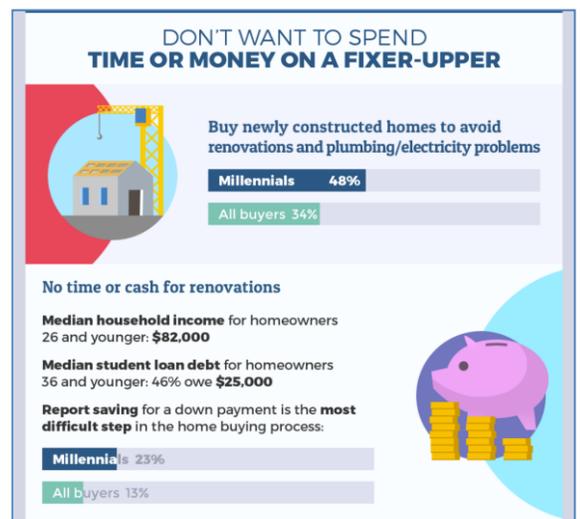
What it lacks is necessary infrastructure: a good access road, utilities, and possibly the transformation of the trestle into a biking/walking link to downtown. A master developer could provide this, but to date the City has not been able to attract such an entity. City government may need to provide this itself if it wishes to open the site up to smaller developers.

Action A2. Focus on redevelopment of northern end of Augusta downtown.

With the leadership of the Downtown Alliance and critical City support like the Tipping Point program, Water Street is becoming transformed. Now the goal is to move the new investment north towards the train trestle and Mill Park. Fundraising for the proposed Colonial Theater renovation, possible transformation of the trestle into a walking bridge, a possible UMA tech center, are all possible anchor investments for a rejuvenated neighborhood.

Action A3. Promote new housing development – especially market-rate, workforce, and millennial housing¹.

Kennebec Locke is one opportunity, but there are other sites in the city where new residential development can take place. While the City’s role in promoting market-rate residential development is limited, reviewing current ordinances and making sure that the City can market itself as “open to innovative residential development” is a first step.



¹ See <http://www.visualcapitalist.com/millennials-changing-housing-market/>

Action A4. Enhance code enforcement capability.

In recent years, City government has passed ordinances to protect historic character and ensure housing maintenance. Now additional effort is needed to enforce these codes, particularly on Sand Hill and in the West End. In addition, one new code is proposed – a boarding house code, that would charge a fee that would pay for City code staff to inspect these properties and ensure that they are up to standard.

Action A5. Evaluate downtown and Winthrop Street parking options

The Augusta Parking District has performed an important function in managing and providing parking for downtown. Yet challenges still remain. Long-term (2+ hour) parking options for customers are not easily provided. The topography of downtown, from the river to the parking garage at the top of the hill, can be difficult for pedestrians to navigate. Meanwhile, on Winthrop Street, the line differentiating publicly-owned space and privately-owned space is unclear, and parking practices vary by block. This is an appropriate time for the City and Parking District to review parking practices and availability as downtown continues to grow.

ONGOING ACTIVITY

In addition to the new initiatives above, the City will continue its current policies of:

- Supporting and working with the **Downtown Alliance**.
- Trying to redevelop the **Arsenal property**

GOAL B: MARKET THE AUGUSTA BRAND

Part of attracting new people to live and work in Augusta is improving the image and brand of the city.

NEW INITIATIVES

Action B1. Step up online Augusta presence – social media, web site, an app.

If the goal is to attract millennials, then the communication needs to be electronic. This needs to be an ongoing effort, not a one-time fix. Social media, a usable phone app, an actively updated web site, are all part of the answer.



Action B2. Try to attract a sports team to Augusta.

Sports teams build city identity and pride. Augusta supported semi-pro baseball in the (distant) past. The potential for a minor-league level team in any sport – from soccer to baseball to basketball – should be explored anew.

Action B3. Improve landscaping and physical appearance of Augusta at gateway streets.

The first impression of visitors to Augusta is made by the roadways into the city from I-95. Better landscaping would be helpful – but it will cost money, and fiscal limitations are what has prevented it from happening in the past. This item should be considered again in the 2018 budget.

GOAL C: IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF AUGUSTA RESIDENTS

By virtue of its location, history, and major institutions – state government, Maine General Hospital, and the University of Maine at Augusta – the city of Augusta has unique opportunities to develop attractive amenities that can serve its existing – and prospective – residents.

NEW INITIATIVES

Action C1. Explore ways to provide city-owned or sponsored high speed broadband service.

Chattanooga, Tennessee has a municipally-owned utility that provides resident households with 100 Mbps service for \$58/month; 1,000 Mbps for \$70/month; and 10 GIG service at \$300/month. This has transformed the city economy. One visiting journalist observed:

When I first started visiting the city, in 2010, months after EPB had deployed its fiber-optic technology to home networks, the downtown area was still filled with empty factory buildings. In 2016, an incredibly vibrant tech community has filled many of those vacant buildings with open-office spaces for start-ups. The music and film communities are vital, too, and there is a real downtown nightlife with bars and restaurants open late and filled with hipsters.²

This is a complex issue, but Augusta should explore its options.

Action C2. Create a Public Art Commission designed to promote public art in the downtown, in the gateways, and in other locations in the city.

This past summer the Kennebec Leadership Institute, the University of Maine at Augusta, and the Downtown Alliance coordinated a successful effort to create murals on downtown buildings. The City should look to institutionalize this kind of effort with an ongoing public art strategy to be created by a new Public Art Commission.



Action C3. Create a walking tour that goes from the Maine State Museum to Fort Western.

This summer a new fire museum will open at the renovated Hartford Fire Station in downtown. In addition, a First Amendment Museum will open soon at the historic Gannett House next to the Blaine House. This creates the potential for a walking tour of museums in Augusta – from the State Museum to the First Amendment Museum to the Hartford Fire Station Museum to Old Fort Western. The potential should be actively marketed online and through brochures, etc.

² See <https://www.thedailybeast.com/chattanooga-has-its-own-broadbandwhy-doesnt-every-city>

ONGOING ACTIVITY

In addition to the new initiatives above, the City will continue its current effort to publish a **trails** map and to create events related to the trails.

GOAL D: SOCIAL SERVICES

Augusta is a service center, with a general hospital and a mental health hospital, and many social service agencies. As such, it has many people in the general population in need of housing and support services. In addition, in recent years Catholic Charities and other relief agencies have located refugees and immigrants here because the area has low crime, low-cost housing, and a good service network. Finally, the opiate crisis continues to grip the state; Augusta has dealt fairly effectively with the criminal justice aspects of the problem, but people continue to die from drug overdoses in Augusta. Better services for drug users are needed.

NEW INITIATIVES

Action D1. Support the establishment of substance abuse treatment programs and facilities in the city.

On average, one person dies every day in Maine from a drug overdose. About 1 in 5 of Maine people in need of substance abuse treatment receives care. This situation has led the Veterans Services at Togus to send Maine veterans to Connecticut and other out-of-state locations for residential treatment. Currently, Maine General provides some treatment beds, and there is a proposal from a private entity to develop residential treatment beds in Augusta. This kind of project will require careful consideration with regard to scale, design, neighborhood impact, safety, and fiscal impact.

Action D2. Expand immigrant focused-programs.

In recent years, the Capital Area New Mainers Project has helped to welcome refugees and immigrants to Augusta from places such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. New Mainers are part of the long-term answer to the workforce shortage in central Maine. But in the short term, they need help with English as a second language, transportation, school integration, job training and placement, and social support. The idea of a welcome center to Augusta has been floated and discussed; it deserves further study.



Action D3. Explore the establishment of a city-owned or city-sponsored homeless shelter.

The Bread of Life Ministries had 509 calls for people looking for a bed at night in 2016. The Bread of Life has a 26-bed family shelter and a 12-bed veterans shelter, and the beds are mostly full. The issue of what do homeless people need, and where is the best place to provide such services, has been a subject of ongoing discussion in Augusta. In other Maine cities, the municipality plays a stronger role in

providing shelter and services to the homeless. The City should look into whether this is a desirable and viable idea for the future.

ONGOING ACTIVITY

In addition to the new initiatives above, the City will continue its current efforts to support the **Age-Friendly initiative** in Augusta, with a current emphasis on expanding transportation services.

GOAL E. GOVERNANCE

As is mentioned in the background piece, Augusta faces long-term fiscal challenges. This leads to the first recommendation below.

NEW INITIATIVE

Action E1. Create a 5-year budget and capital improvements program that shows a path for tax rate stability in the future.

Every year there seems to be a new fiscal issue, brought on by a recession or state government cuts or major capital needs. Nothing can prevent new crises from arising in the future. But what would help councilors this year would be to see a draft fiscal plan for the coming five years that would show how – based on current fiscal practices and trends – the city could maintain a stable tax rate and still meet its capital needs over that period.



ONGOING ACTIVITY

In addition to the above, the City will continue to:

- **work closely with the school system** on a variety of issues, including new immigrants, food security, and the location of a proposed new elementary school
- pursue its **Comprehensive Plan**. That plan is leaving the data collection stage, which took place last year, and will be entering its phase of public input and policy development.
- carry out a planned **charter review** with a new commission.