

2019 AUGUSTA CITY COUNCIL GOALS AND ACTIONS

(February 19, 2019)

INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, January 26, 2019, members of the Augusta City Council, staff, and partner organizations met in the Augusta Civic Center for a 6-hour goal-setting session. The session was written up by staff, then revised and approved by the Council as a whole.



2018 IN REVIEW

A major issue discussed in the 2018 Council retreat was the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Over the course of 2018, the Council acted to address pay deficiencies in the Police and Fire Departments, which had an immediate and positive effect on recruitment and retention.

To promote energy conservation and reduce carbon emissions, the City purchased 2,200 CMP-owned street lights and will be converting them to City-owned LED lights – which will help the environment by saving 670,000 kilowatt hours of electricity per year, and will help taxpayers by saving hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. A recently-completed \$3 million methane-gas-to-electricity project at Hatch Hill will similarly reduce carbon emissions and save taxpayers money every year going forward.

In response to last year's strategic plan recommendation A4 ("Enhance code enforcement capability"), the City hired a third code enforcement officer, created a bureau director's position to lead the code enforcement team, and demolished six dilapidated buildings.

To improve the City's quality of life, the Council created the positions of Parks and Recreation Director and Recreation coordinator; accepted grants to improve Bond Brook Recreation Area and the Lithgow Library Reading Room; finalized arrangements for the 154-acre Howard Hill Historic Park; completed the last quarter-mile of the Rail Trail to Waterfront Park; sponsored or co-sponsored over 300 events in City parks; and assisted the YMCA to obtain \$50,000 in grants to serve the immigrant community.

To promote economic development, the City revised its zoning to expand opportunities for home occupations, small distilleries and bakeries, construction training, and apartments. The comprehensive plan update was started in 2018 as well.

With this as background, here are the City's goals for 2019.

GOAL A: IMPROVE MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

On page 30 of the 2008 Augusta Comprehensive Plan, the following vision of the “Augusta brand” is laid out:

Augusta and the Kennebec Valley are known throughout New England as a place with a beautiful River, a historic downtown, great outdoor recreation opportunities, a lively cultural scene, and environmentally responsible development.



Since then, the subject of better marketing of Augusta has been raised periodically. Downtown Augusta has promoted the city well. The municipal web site has been improved – but even so, it takes 4 or 5 clicks to navigate to the right place. In addition, individual departments in City Hall are responsible for the management of their section of the web site and social media communications, which leads to inconsistent attention, detail, and treatment. Individual departments are also responsible for routine public communication to the press. There is no overall strategy for maximizing the effectiveness of social media for promoting the city.

This has not stopped people from moving here. Council members have anecdotes about people moving to Augusta today from out of state to retire or raise their families because of the city’s access to the outdoors, affordability, safety, quality of services. Yet these facts are still not widely enough known.

At the January retreat, Council members made better communication, marketing, and messaging the top goal for 2019. School department representatives at the meeting said that the school board retreat came up with the same result.

Action A1. The Mayor should appoint an ad-hoc marketing and communications committee consisting of representatives of the Council, the Board of Education, City and School Department staff, the Kennebec Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Augusta Utility District, Downtown Augusta, the Capital Area New Mainers Project, Augusta Age-Friendly, and others as needed.

The committee should be charged with carrying out Action A2 below – namely, developing an RFP, interviewing and hiring a consultant, overseeing the consultant’s work, and recommending a strategy to the Council and Board of Education at the end of the process.

Action A2. Create a comprehensive marketing and communications strategy for the City Council and Board of Education.

Marketing and communications are two distinct, but overlapping, tasks. Marketing involves the promotion of visiting, living, and working within Augusta to the outside world. Communication involves access to current information in an easy-to-use format for staff, residents, and others, about what is going on. Though both are distinct, both are implemented on the same media platforms by the same City/School staff, and therefore the strategy for each should be integrated.

A marketing and communications strategy involves identifying the message; the audiences; the media platforms; the look; the staffing; the procedures and coordination; the measurements of effectiveness. The strategy should be developed by an expert marketing consultant, under the direction of the committee identified above. The Augusta City Council and Augusta Board of Education should share in the costs, approve a joint strategy, and implement the joint strategy together.

Action A3. Together with the School Department, hire a public affairs officer to implement the marketing and communications strategy.

With a strategy in hand, the City and School Department should hire a public affairs officer – either full or part-time, staff or consultant, depending upon the study results -- to implement the program. That staff would be responsible for ensuring that there is a consistent message and current information across all media platforms

GOAL B: CONTINUE EFFORTS TO MANAGE AND REDUCE THE CARBON FOOTPRINT OF CITY GOVERNMENT.

Augusta took important steps in 2018 to reduce its carbon footprint by adopting LED streetlights and recapturing methane gas from the landfill. But much more needs to be done, in Augusta, in Maine, in the United States, and in the world.

Action B1: Examine best practices from around the country

The cities of Portland and Boston, among others, have set carbon reduction goals and established a strategy for attainment. City staff or a consultant should review such programs from around the country, and see what pieces make sense for Augusta.

GOAL C: KEEP COUNCILORS INFORMED ABOUT CITY TRENDS

News coverage and Council agendas concentrate on a few high visibility issues at a time. Yet while these debates go on, every day, behind the scenes, city workers go to their jobs and carry out essential services: fire suppression, police work, sweeping streets, picking up trash, enforcing codes, arranging public events, and the like.

How can City Councilors stay informed about how the day-to-day work of the City is doing? One way is to keep track of the complaints that people bring to them. Councilors discussed this issue, talked about customer satisfaction, and concluded that the best way to keep up would be for the City Manager to provide a quarterly performance report.

In 2007, during the prior Comprehensive Plan effort, the City contracted with a private firm to survey Augusta citizens about their satisfaction with City services and desires for the future. This might be a time to consider doing such a survey again.

Action C1. Provide quarterly performance reports to City Council.

Starting on April 1, 2019, the City Manager will provide a brief update on the performance of City Departments in the prior three months. The report will be a combination of standard data indicators and bullet point descriptions, and will be compiled by the Department heads. It will be similar to municipal dashboards used around the country. The report will identify issues coming up in the next quarter (such as job vacancies) as well as those dealt with in the past quarter. The format will be refined over time as Councilors identify what is useful to them, what is unnecessary, and what is missing.

GOAL D: HONOR AUGUSTA’S UNIQUE ROLE IN MAINE HISTORY BY PLAYING A PROMINENT ROLE IN 2019-2020 BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS



On June 19, 1819, the Massachusetts legislature passed legislation enabling Maine to separate from Massachusetts and become a separate state. On July 19, 1819, Maine voters approved statehood. On March 15, 1820, Congress approved statehood for Maine as part of the Missouri Compromise.

Starting in 2019 and extending into 2020, Maine will celebrate the bicentennial of statehood

through a series of celebrations. The City of Augusta, as state capital, will naturally have the opportunity to host a number of these events. Two current events under discussion include a kickoff event in the spring (with the Governor) and a “cities of the Kennebec” event over the summer. Hosting such events may require some expenditure of staff time and administrative expenses on the part of city government. The Council decided at its retreat that city government should embrace these opportunities as a way to further the city’s promotion (see Goal A).

For an overview of events being planned for the bicentennial, see <https://www.maine200.org/>.

Action D1. Assist in planning, organizing and sponsoring key events like the spring Kickoff celebration and a summer Cities of the Kennebec celebration.

Action D2. Create a contingency account in the City budget to be available to cover expenses for this purpose.

GOAL E: SUPPORT THE REESTABLISHMENT OF THE CAPITAL RIVERFRONT IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (CRID)

In 1999, as part of the negotiations around taking down the Edwards Dam, the City of Augusta and State of Maine jointly created the Capital Riverfront District. The District was directed by a board consisting of state commissioners, city staff, and local citizens. It prepared a strategy for the

redevelopment of the area, assisted in getting funds that initiated the redevelopment of Mill Park, and coordinated state investments in the area.



With changes of administrations, and state budget crises, first state funding , and then state commissioner participation, ceased. The CRID went dormant.

Yet the state legislation establishing the CRID remains. With a new administration, and a bicentennial coming up, there is a new opportunity to reestablish this unique and once-effective organization for city-state cooperation and joint action.

Action E1. Work to get State government to appoint new members to the Board; follow with appointments from City government.

The legislative delegation representing the city of Augusta will approach the Governor’s Office to solicit appointments.

Action E2. Work with State government to find support for CRID operations; follow with support from City government.

Once the board is reconstituted, board members themselves can assess what resources are needed for effective functioning, and approach the State and City to contribute their fair share.

GOAL F: SUPPORT THE ARTS

Arts are a growing attraction in Augusta. In the past decade, a new Lithgow Library, new UMA architectural program, a new Hartford Fire Museum, a new First Amendment Museum, a new Kennebec Historical Society Museum, and a new Colonial Theater, adding to the existing Old Fort Western and Maine State Museum, are combining to create a critical mass of arts and historic attractions downtown. The momentum needs to be continued.

Action F1. Create a Public Art Commission designed to promote public art in the downtown, in the gateways, and in other locations in the city.

This is an action carried over from last year. In 2017, 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. The City of Portland Public Art Committee offers a possible model to follow (<https://www.portlandmaine.gov/349/Public-Art-Committee>).



The Commission would consist of appointed community members. It would include members from Downtown Augusta and the University of Maine at Augusta. They would look at successes from other communities, including Belfast, which received three grants, and Waterville, which boasts Waterville



Creates. They would look to access grants from the Maine Arts Commission. They might also request seed money from the City of Augusta to get started. Councilor O'Brien will provide ideas for an ordinance to establish the Commission.

Action F2. Continue to support the private fundraising effort of the Colonial Theater.

This is a critical linchpin to the future of the downtown.

GOAL G: IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE

There are a variety of possibilities under discussion in the city that would enhance the quality of life. Among them are the possibilities of a public outdoor ice skating rink, new turf on Alumni Field, expanding trails on the East Side, and a walking bridge over the river to downtown.

Action G1: Evaluate the capacity of the Community Services Department to meet its obligations in light of additional commitments and the aging of the population.

Every year the Community Services Department gains new responsibilities (i.e., new trails and parks to manage, new skating rink, etc.), even as its resources decrease. With the aging of the population in the City, such responsibilities may increase in the future. During this year's budget review, City staff will look closely at the Department's responsibilities, staffing and budget needs, now and into the mid-term (5-10 year) future.

Action G2: "Optimize" the city's environmental assets by investing in their preservation and marketing their use.

Augusta has the Kennebec River and many trails and parks. Last year, the Community Services Department published a map highlighting those assets for visitors. This year, the Comprehensive Planning Committee should analyze how the city can maximize the environmental health of its assets, as well as how it can promote the health of its citizens by marketing the use of these assets.

Action G3: Clarify the ownership situation of the concrete piers in the Kennebec River.

There is a possibility of a walking/bicycling trail connection over the Kennebec River on the concrete piers which formerly supported a railroad track. But the ownership status of the piers is not clear, and this is a first step to evaluating the feasibility of a trail connection. Alternatively, explore the feasibility of pedestrian use of the existing railroad trestle as an option.

Action G4: Update the All Hazards Disaster Preparedness Plan and review with the Council.

Action G5. Prioritize pedestrian safety in road improvement projects.

City staff will review pedestrian safety issues in Augusta, particularly on the rotaries and state roads, and identify ways to collaborate with the Maine Department of Transportation on improve pedestrian access, including the possibility of adding City enhancement funds to projects.

Action G6. Complete the needs assessment and design work on the possible new police station in time to put the question on the ballot for City voters to decide in November.

GOAL H: SUPPORT HIGH QUALITY DEVELOPMENT

This is a perennial goal of City Council retreats, and continues to be so this year. The City needs to have more middle-income housing, more jobs, more tax base, and more high-quality development along the riverfront.

Action H1: Prepare a white paper on the possibility of the City developing its own broadband service.

High speed broadband is available in the city, but the primary cable provider is expensive. City staff will examine what options municipalities in Maine have to encourage more affordable broadband (including the idea of becoming a public provider of broadband itself), and bring this to Council for discussion at an informational meeting.

Action H2: Conduct a Council workshop or information session on how to address obstacles to the development of Kennebec Locke and Riggs Brook Village.

Even as the economy continues to do well in Maine, and even as in-town river sites in other Maine communities are redeveloping, the Kennebec Locke site still awaits a private investor. Road access and utility services remain a roadblock at Kennebec Locke. At Riggs Brook Village, there are questions of zoning and utilities. City economic development staff will conduct an informational session to discuss both projects.



Action H3: Conduct a Council workshop or information session on code enforcement.

Code enforcement staff will meet with City Councilors and give a detailed review of “problem properties” in all neighborhoods in the city. The staff and Council will explore ways to prod owners to bring properties up to code, including the possibility of instituting a fine for chronic delinquent property owners.

Action H4: Conduct a workshop or information session on Local Option Sales Tax legislation.

As the Legislative session moves forward, certain bills involving local option sales taxes will move forward. At the appropriate time, City staff will present the bills to the Council. At that time, staff will determine whether majority of Council members support some form of local option taxes, and if so, if there is a consensus on a recommended approach.

Action H5. Continue to promote the possibility of passenger rail service.

Better transportation connections to Portland and Boston are important to Augusta’s future.