

2015 AUGUSTA CITY COUNCIL GOALS AND ACTIONS (March 13, 2015)

GOAL A: CONTINUE TO PROMOTE BUSINESS INVESTMENT

“Augusta welcomes all shapes and sizes of economic development. We pride ourselves on an open and fair process for promoting growth and leadership. We also work hard to ensure that new developments reflect the unique characteristics of Augusta’s neighborhoods...”

Augusta Comprehensive Plan, 2007, page 24.

At long last, Central Maine is emerging from the long recession. Unemployment is down. Businesses are hiring. Retail sales are up. This is the point in the business cycle when the greatest opportunity exists for Augusta to achieve economic, job, and income growth.

Augusta has an excellent inventory of quality office space for rent, both in town and near the interstate. The city has a major riverfront parcel next to downtown at Kennebec Locke which is ready to go. The city has commercially zoned land near the I-95 exit at Riggs Brook Village. Augusta City Government has been designated by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development as “business-friendly,” and City staff have a good reputation among area businesses for being responsive and helpful. This is a year for a breakthrough project.

This objective will be supported by three key activities in 2015.

1. (INITIATE) On the model of the Eastside Planning Committee, the Mayor shall appoint a new Augusta Economic and Workforce Development Committee. The Committee shall be chaired by Councilor Darek Grant, and will include members with business acumen and with appreciation for quality of life issues. The Committee shall be staffed by and provide support to the City Department of Development Services. The Committee will work to:
 - a) Insure the availability of a skilled workforce, in partnership with the Augusta City Schools, the University of Maine at Augusta, the Capital Area Technical Center, Kaplan University, and the State of Maine Career Center;
 - b) Promote sites that are ready to go and serviced by utilities, such as Kennebec Locke and Augusta Downtown; and
 - c) Make progress on achieving long term development projects in the City, such as Riggs Brook Village and the Arsenal.
2. (INITIATE) Hold a marketing forum to generate ideas about how to coordinate and enhance the City’s marketing and branding efforts; and
3. (INITIATE) Hold a workshop for the purpose of updating the implementation program on the 2007 Comprehensive Plan (eliminating actions that have been accomplished or are no longer relevant, adding actions that address new opportunities, rescheduling remaining actions);

GOAL B: CONTINUE TO ENHANCE THE APPEARANCE OF THE CITY

“Augusta’s image is communicated directly to visitors and residents by the look and feel of the City’s physical development. If the City of Augusta’s brand is Capitol, river, and history (as is currently contained in the City’s logo), then the physical features of the City from its gateways to its roadways, must reinforce the qualities of dignity, natural beauty, and historic architecture.”

Augusta Comprehensive Plan, 2007, page 29.



Up to 40,000 people travel in and through Augusta every day, residents, workers, and tourists. The appearance that Augusta presents is a major influence on whether these people will give Augusta a second look as a possible home or business location.

During the recent recession, some buildings were abandoned; some property owners cut back on maintenance; and even some public infrastructure suffered from neglect. Improving the physical appearance of buildings and streetscapes will help business throughout the city, in particular in the downtown.

2015 is a good year to improve the appearance of the City. This involves:

1. (INITIATE) In upcoming Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) projects located in city gateways, such as Western Avenue and Mount Vernon Street, when financially and technically feasible, enhance landscaping and lighting above MDOT basic standards, using City resources;
2. (SUSTAIN) Pass the historic district ordinance that will open up possibilities for developers to gain tax credits from building rehabilitation in the downtown;
3. (INITIATE) Explore the financial feasibility of establishing a multi-year process of inspecting all rental residential units in the city for health and safety code violations;
4. (SUSTAIN) Develop the Mill Park brick building, consistent with redeveloping downtown and the Capital Riverfront Improvement District (CRID) Master Plan, to include provision for a cultural heritage center;
5. (INITIATE) In the upcoming budget process, consider cost options to reinstitute some form of clean-up day, where residents have the opportunity to dispose of junk that has accumulated in the past year; and
6. (INITIATE) Explore ways to improve local codes, including the consideration of creating a “vacant buildings” code to specifically address the issue of poorly maintained commercial buildings in the downtown, and the consideration of ways to tighten the home occupations ordinance.

GOAL C: CONTINUE TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR RESIDENTS

“As a regional service center, Augusta will always have a population of people with lower incomes and/or special needs.”

Augusta Comprehensive Plan, 2007, page 17.

The recession is over, but still 18% of Augusta residents live below the poverty line. Around half of the children in Augusta schools receive free or reduced price lunches, an indication that poverty rates are even higher for young people. The rate of “cognitive disability” in Augusta for 18-34 year olds (17%) is three times the rate of the rest of Maine. All of these are populations that experience hunger and homelessness, and are often involved in the criminal justice system.

As this is going on, state government is proposing major changes to General Assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) programs, all of which will reduce resources available to address these issues.

There has been an increase in heroin use and addiction in Augusta, as has happened in cities all across Maine. Other concerns include the lack of pay increases for working people, and a continuing need for decent affordable housing.

Actions for 2015 include:

1. (INITIATE) The Police Chief and Manager will present information about heroin use and addiction in Augusta, and possible actions for its elimination, at an upcoming informational meeting;
2. (INITIATE) Upon the receipt of policy information from the Mayor and staff at an informational meeting, Council will deliberate upon the advisability and potential impact of a local minimum wage ordinance at an
3. (INITIATE) Ask the Joint Conference Committee of the Augusta School Board and Augusta City Council to study the issue of childhood hunger and homelessness, define the scope of the problem, and recommend steps towards its alleviation; and
4. (SUSTAIN) Continue to work with the Augusta Housing Authority to assure the development of more safe and affordable housing in Augusta.

GOAL D: CONTINUE TO BUILD A GREEN AUGUSTA

“... Augusta is perfectly positioned to be a “green city” that sets standards for action on preserving open space and wildlife habitats, reducing energy usage, and promoting environmentally sustainable development and lifestyles while continuing to embrace residential and economic growth.”

Augusta Comprehensive Plan, 2007, page 21.

Augusta is already a national leader in environmental practices. It has the first Platinum LEED-certified grocery store in the nation, the Hannaford’s at Cony Circle. It is the first city in the nation to have a dam removed strictly for ecological reasons, and to achieve LEED-certified energy efficiency standards in its public buildings.

This year three important natural resource projects are moving forward. The first is the completion of negotiations with the Kennebec Land Trust to accept a donation of 164 acres of unspoiled land behind the Capitol Building called Howard Hill. The second is the connection of the Kennebec Rail Trail with the waterfront park on the west side of the River. The third is an adoption of a forest management plan for the approximately 450 acres of open space the City already owns.

The City's green goals can be furthered by these additional actions:

1. (SUSTAIN) Execute the 6-month pilot project for single source recycling, evaluate the impact on recycling rates and costs, and identify improvements for the future;
2. (INITIATE) Conduct a Council workshop on the concept of "Complete Streets" – streets that accommodate all forms of transportation, from driving to walking to riding bicycles.
3. (INITIATE) In preparation for this event, city staff (or a summer intern) shall assess the physical conditions of sidewalks within the city, gaps in the network, and access issues (such as Memorial Park on the west side rotary);

GOAL E: CONTINUE TO COMMUNICATE WITH PARTNERS

"Augusta will look outside of itself for partners in state government, in neighboring communities and school districts, and in the private sector, to jointly invest in new technologies, share staffing, and consolidate services."

Augusta Comprehensive Plan, 2007, page 2.

The Governor is proposing a comprehensive tax reform that would eliminate revenue sharing, reduce state aid to county jail (the difference would be made up by the property tax), and reduce public school funding. At the same time, it would enable the City to impose partial property taxes on the larger nonprofit institutions located here. Other legislators are reintroducing legislation that would reduce Augusta's excise tax revenues.

It is impossible to tell at this time how it will all shake out. The situation presents major dangers. But it also presents opportunities. Legislators may be open this year to ideas that have been rejected in the past.

The situation requires close communication between city councilors and the legislative delegation, and between councilors and school board members.

1. (SUSTAIN) Press the legislative delegation to reintroduce the idea of payment in lieu of taxes for state properties, on the same principle that is now being discussed for nonprofit properties;
2. (SUSTAIN) Arrange Council-legislator meetings on an as-needed basis, particularly in the spring, to discuss trends and strategic possibilities;
3. (SUSTAIN) Conduct quarterly meetings of the Joint Conference Committee of City Council and the School Board, as well as enhancing the use of televised Council meetings to highlight the achievements of students and teachers;

4. (SUSTAIN) Review and restructure existing Council committees to insure the best use of Council members' time; and
5. (SUSTAIN) Provide an opportunity for councilors to raise issues not on the formal agenda that are informative and short – “for the good of the order.”

FURTHER IDEAS TO CONSIDER IN THE COMING YEAR

Beyond the larger goals that are addressed above, Council members identified smaller actions that the City should consider in their activities in the coming year. These include:

1. (INITIATE) Consider expanding coverage of the existing property maintenance code to single family owners through an informational meeting;
2. (INITIATE) Consider the implementation of an “adopt a garden” program for key city parks, through an informational meeting agenda item;
3. (INITIATE) Conduct a Council informational workshop on the pesticides notification process;
4. (SUSTAIN) Examine the feasibility of funding more staff for fire, police, and code enforcement, in order to improve service delivery;
5. (SUSTAIN) Accelerate the implementation of LED lighting in the city.
6. (SUSTAIN) Consider alternative technologies, such as garbage trucks that load with automatic arms, as a way to create efficiencies in the budget;
7. (SUSTAIN) Support efforts to restore the historic Colonial Theater.