

Governor’s Council on Maine’s Quality of Place
Downtown Focus Group

Linking Maine’s Built and Natural Environments

Our Vision

Maine’s downtowns have:

- a sense of civic engagement
- distinctive historical and architectural structures
- ample housing, thriving store fronts, and art and artists’ spaces
- public gathering places that host cultural and community events
- a close, walkable interface between the built and natural environments
- residents, workers, and visitors moving between and among these venues

Our Premise

Maine’s Quality of Place is dependent on both its urban and rural areas. Indeed, the two are inextricably connected. Vital downtowns attract people, support businesses, and provide housing preventing the sprawl that diminishes our natural land and waterscapes. Greenways provide healthy, natural settings that make downtowns attractive.

An important part of Maine’s heritage is its historic built environment –civic buildings, schools, libraries, grange halls, opera houses and theaters, and other public gathering places. These buildings bring people together and provide opportunities for civic engagement and socializing. They are the “flip side” to Maine’s special natural landscapes. The two together comprise the magical places that make up a community’s “place.”

However, Maine is losing its unique historical resources. Beautiful old buildings are being torn down or left to deteriorate. Civic buildings and schools are being pushed out of downtowns in favor of new structures on greenfield sites. Just as with our exceptional natural environment, there is an equal urgency to preserve and maintain Maine’s distinctive built environment, which once gone, is gone forever.

Maine needs to make a sustained investment to protect its distinct historical heritage on which its Quality of Place depends.

Our Recommendations

Key Recommendations

Enact the Maine Community Preservation Act with \$25 million a year for five years to:

- Acquire land and easements for urban parks and trails, river and canal walks, and greenways and green spaces and public access to them

- Rehabilitate historic structures for use as public gathering places, such as city halls, opera houses, grange buildings
- Fund related community enhancements to “set off” the newly-restored structures, such as sidewalks, street lamps, benches, and parks and trail infrastructure, with an emphasis on community gateways

Create the Maine Intrastate Trail System

- Identify and plan a system of multi-use trails from Kittery to Fort Kent from Eastport to Bethel. The system would not only link rural trails, but would also provide access through sidewalks, urban trails, and greenways to downtown shops, restaurants, and cultural attractions.

Provide Communities with Downtown Development Assistance

- Fund the Maine Downtown Center at \$300,000 a year to support the Main Street Maine program
- Provide \$100,000 to the Maine Downtown Center to support a technical assistance program for communities that do not have the resources to commit to Main Street Maine.

Enhance Historic Preservation Tools

- Support the *Act To Amend the Credit for Rehabilitation of Historic Properties* (LD 262) to make historic rehabilitation projects economically feasible
- Create an administrative structure for Maine’s rehabilitation code that encourages rehabilitation of historic structures
- Develop model zoning language that helps communities preserve the traditional character of their historic neighborhoods

Other Recommendations

Housing/People living in Downtowns

Work with Maine State Housing Authority to use their criteria to infuse walkability, use compatible architecture, preserve character-defining historic architectural elements, and support other Quality of Place goals in their housing projects.

Schools

Address issues that discourage the rehabilitation of historic school buildings and that force schools out of downtowns (like requiring minimum acreages and imposing the same codes and standards as for new construction).

Public Buildings

Reverse policies that encourage federal, state, and local buildings (court houses, post offices, municipal buildings) to leave and provide incentives to keep these buildings in our downtowns.

Incentives for Entrepreneurs

Provide incentives to locate in downtowns and in historic buildings (creative economy link)

Downtown Development Tool Box

Create a downtown development tool box for planning boards, municipal officials, and local stakeholders that helps them access historic tax credits, understand building codes, implement

transfer of development rights (linking greenways), and assess development fees for greenfield development

Promotional Resources

Provide “unique destination” resources for downtowns to use as an economic development tool to attract businesses, employers, workers, visitors, and tourists.

Coalition of Downtown Preservation/Environmental Groups

Support a coalition of downtown advocates as powerful as Maine’s natural resource and land conservation organizations; ultimately joining forces.