

## **Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place**

### **Downtown Focus Group**

#### *Linking Maine's Built and Natural Environments*

### **Our Vision**

Maine's downtowns will 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, thus limiting sprawling development that diminishes our natural land and waterscapes. Greenways provide healthy, natural settings that make downtowns attractive and invoke our natural heritage in an urban setting.

An important part of Maine's heritage is its historic built environment – civic buildings, schools, libraries, grange halls, opera houses, theaters, and other public gathering places. These buildings bring people together and provide opportunities for social and civic engagement. 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. Many structures in our downtowns are being torn down, underutilized, 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 urgent need to preserve and maintain Maine's distinctive built environment. Once gone, it is gone forever.

Our quality of place depends on making a sustained investment in protecting the distinct historical heritage of our downtowns and village centers.

### **Our Recommendations**

#### **Key Recommendations**

##### *1. Adopt a state downtown development policy*

State support for downtown development and investment is sporadic and diffuse. The State must vigorously promote downtown revitalization. State downtown investments must be a cornerstone of Maine's asset-based development strategy.

The Council recommends that the Governor and Legislature embrace a strong policy statement supporting Maine's downtowns. We offer the following policy language for consideration:

*Whereas, downtowns are part of Maine's unique quality of place and serve not only as the economic engines of our regions but as social and cultural centers, historic assets, civic hubs, and homes to families and businesses; and*

*Whereas, our downtowns are diverse, distinctive venues that draw young people, entrepreneurs, and retirees; and*

*Whereas, our downtowns are regional centers that provide a home for services and commerce, keep sprawling developing in check, and enhance rural landscapes; and*

*Whereas, our downtowns are economic assets critical to the State's overall economic health and the health of the regions in which they are located; and*

*Whereas, Maine must have a robust, far-reaching effort to increase the vitality of our downtowns;*

*Now, therefore, be it resolved that Maine state government shall support and coordinate downtown investment efforts as a cornerstone of the State's asset-based development strategy.*

## ***2. Provide Communities with Downtown Development Assistance***

The Maine Downtown Center, a program of the Maine Development Foundation (MDF), is the State's primary vehicle for helping communities make their downtowns vital. The Center uses the Main Street™ Maine program, a proven economic development model established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation that stresses a comprehensive approach to downtown revitalization. Since the Main Street Maine program began in 2001, millions of dollars have been invested in Maine's downtowns, new businesses have opened, and new jobs have been created.

The State funds the Maine Downtown Center at \$75,000 per year, not enough to maintain an effective program and insufficient to expand the program to other interested communities. Each year, MDF cobbles together funding and invests heavily of its own resources, but still falls short of what is needed to support the kind of programs that are needed. Brookings states that the Maine Downtown Center is woefully underfunded, especially when compared to other rural states, and calls for \$300,000 annually in state budget support for the Main Street Main program. This program must be adequately funded given the importance of robust downtowns to our state's economy.

The Main Street Maine program requires a considerable investment from its participating municipalities (for example, local funding of a full-time development director). Consequently, state investment must be adequate and consistent over time to match efforts at the local level.

The Council also recognizes the need for a continuum of services. These should range from the full Main Street program, to a small communities program, to basic downtown revitalization technical assistance. By providing a range of services, the program can match its efforts to the budgets and capabilities of any given community.

The Council further recommends that a mechanism be established for the purpose of evaluating communities' needs and determining the appropriate level and scope of downtown assistance. We believe that the regional economic development structure already in place can fill the role of providing front-line, local resources. This would be similar to administration of the technical assistance side of the CDBG program, where DECD contracts with regional councils of government to assist with entry level technical assistance, completing application forms, and accessing resources. The same approach could work for downtown development.

The council recommends the following investments in Maine's downtowns:

- \$300,000 annually to the Maine Downtown Center to support the Main Street Maine program;
- \$200,000 annually to the Maine Downtown Center to support a small community or village program for communities that do not have the resources to commit to Main Street Maine;
- \$100,000 to support communities with basic technical assistance needs; and
- \$150,000 to Maine's regional councils of government to evaluate communities' downtown development needs and assist them with planning and accessing available resources, including the State's CDBG grant program.

### ***3. Enhance Historic Preservation Tools***

LD 262 is currently before the legislature and would enhance Maine's tax credit for rehabilitation of historic properties. This tax credit is a proven mechanism to stimulate downtown and economic development. If approved, it will generate \$64 million in investment in Maine's economy every year and would have a dramatic affect on downtowns. The cost to implement the tax credit is \$16 million per year, of which \$4 million will be returned in revenues.

The most frequently cited barrier to downtown redevelopment is the lack of a uniform and affordable property rehabilitation code. Research has shown that existing downtown buildings are generally underutilized. In addition, when new construction is cheaper than renovation, developers will opt for new construction, often outside of downtown areas resulting in sprawl. Currently, codes vary substantially from municipality to municipality, complicating project development for building owners, developers, architects, and building trades, and making projects more expensive. While safety concerns are important, they must be balanced against the need to making building rehab projects realistic, feasible, and relatively affordable, while still retaining historic and cultural features.

Finally, mixed-use zoning can enhance traditional downtowns. Brookings refers to this as “form-based zoning” and calls for a new generation of model zoning codes to be developed for Maine. The State should lead an effort to create model ordinance language that municipalities could tailor and adapt to support their specific downtown redevelopment plans and goals.

The Council:

- supports an *Act To Amend the Credit for Rehabilitation of Historic Properties* (LD 262) to help make historic rehabilitation projects economically feasible;
- advocates for an administrative structure for Maine’s building and building rehabilitation codes that encourage downtown redevelopment and the rehabilitation of historic structures; and
- recommends the development of model zoning language that will help communities preserve the traditional character of their historic core neighborhoods.

#### ***4. Create the Maine Intrastate Trail System***

Much of what is attractive about Maine’s downtowns is their link to the natural environment. Being able to stroll along the Kenduskeag Stream in downtown Bangor while stopping for dinner or biking from downtown Brunswick to Reid State Park is part of the allure of these communities. Moving easily between downtowns and our natural landscapes is part of what our quality of place is all about. The Council encourages developing physical links between downtowns and greenways through planning and constructing parks, bridges, trails, and river walks over or adjacent to streams, canals, or railroad beds. Funding would be provided, in part, from the Maine Community Preservation Act (see below). Trail and open space planning elements need to be incorporated into Maine’s downtown development programs and should build on support from and the existing efforts of land trusts, environmental groups, chambers of commerce, MaineDOT, and the tourism industry.

The Council envisions a comprehensive trail system linking and making easily accessible the amenities of Maine’s urban and village centers and our natural attractions. The Council recommends that the State:

- 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 provide access to downtown shops, restaurants, and cultural attractions through sidewalks, urban trails, and greenways.

#### ***5. Enact the Maine Community Preservation Act***

The State is losing the historic structures that are part of Maine’s allure. Many of these structures are public facilities or are used as public gathering places and support associated restaurant and retail development. The Council recognizes the part these structures play in our heritage; they must be preserved.

It does not make sense to rehabilitate an historic building for public use without also making it accessible and ensuring that it is in an attractive setting. An accompanying program that funds streetscape improvements and other public amenities near historic buildings is essential. A separate pool of funding linked to rehabilitating and improving sidewalks, street lights, river walks, and associated amenities is needed.

A capital needs survey conducted in 2005 by Maine's Cultural Affairs Council identified over 560 libraries, town offices, and structures housing arts, preservation, and historical organizations, many of which are historic structures or community focal points, that are in need of repair or renovation. The total need exceeds \$300 Million.

The Council recommends that the Maine Community Preservation program be capitalized at \$25 million per year for five years to:

- acquire land and easements for urban parks and trails, river and canal walks, and greenways and green spaces;
- rehabilitate historic structures for use as public gathering places, such as city halls, opera houses, and grange buildings; and
- fund related community enhancements, such as sidewalks, street lamps, benches, and parks and trail infrastructure (with an emphasis on community gateways), to “set off” these newly-restored structures.

## **Other Recommendations**

### *Housing in Downtowns*

Work with the Maine State Housing Authority to revise their construction standards in a way that infuses walkability, uses compatible architecture, preserves character-defining historic architectural elements, and supports other quality of place goals in housing projects.

### *Schools*

Review current rules, policies, and practices to actively encourage the rehabilitation of historic school buildings and to keep schools in downtown and town center locations. The state must continue to seek ways to not only allow schools to continue in these locations, but also *support* schools in these locations.

### *Public Buildings*

Advocate for policies and provide incentives that encourage federal, state, and local buildings (court houses, post offices, municipal buildings) to stay in our downtowns.

### *Incentives for Entrepreneurs*

Provide incentives to businesses and individual entrepreneurs 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

October 2, 2007, Revised 10-25-07, Revised 10-31-07

transfers of development rights (linking greenways), and assess “development” fees to mitigate for greenfield development.

*Promotional Resources*

Provide resources for communities to promote their downtown as “unique destinations” to attract businesses, employers, workers, visitors, and tourists.

*Coalition of Downtown Preservation/Environmental Groups*

Support Maine’s emerging coalition of downtown advocates with the ultimate goal of integrating the efforts of downtown and environmental groups toward the twin quality of place strategies of preserving and enhancing both our natural and built environments.