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## Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

### Heart of mill city getting new life

Biddeford receives a \$100,000 private grant to stem 'anywhere USA' development, such as chain stores.

By NOEL K. GALLAGHER, Staff Writer

August 11, 2008



Tim Greenway/Staff Photographer  
Biddeford plans to use a \$100,000 grant to help revitalize its downtown, which has suffered from mill jobs moving south, an exodus to the suburbs and the Maine Mall's opening.

BIDDEFORD — The city of Biddeford plans to use a \$100,000 grant to create a downtown master plan that will help the long-neglected city — home to a shuttered mill and a history of vacant storefronts — re-emerge as a bustling core with shops, restaurants, apartments and light industry.

"This will be a thoughtful, deliberate planning process," said Rachel Weyland, executive director of Heart of Biddeford, a downtown revitalization organization that received the grant along with city officials. Weyland will manage the grant along with city staff.

The grant is part of a \$10 million, five-year "Heart & Soul" town planning project by the Orton Family Foundation of Vermont, which is awarding \$100,000 grants to small communities to stem what it calls "anywhere USA" development, such as chain stores.

The grant will help pay for gatherings, events, meetings, interviews and polling to help communities develop downtown development plans.

"We believe a diversity of citizens have the wisdom and ability to steer the change in their communities," Orton Foundation President Bill Roper said in a statement. "Through our Heart & Soul initiative, we're giving people the power and confidence to engage and enhance their unique places for many years to come."

Also receiving grants were Damariscotta; Golden, Colo.; and Victor, Idaho.

In recent years, there has been more business activity in Biddeford's downtown, particularly an effort to increase the arts community with several new galleries. Weyland said the grant money would go toward drawing in residents and community members from outside the downtown core to help them shape future plans. In particular, she said, they want to have input from residents in the coastal area and the University of New England community.

Several local shopkeepers said they welcomed any effort to revitalize the downtown.

Jodie Ling, a Biddeford resident who opened a boutique and art gallery on Main Street last month, said she was encouraged by recent activity downtown.

"It seems like it's getting better. We've seen a lot more foot traffic, and there are more filled-in storefronts than empty," said Ling, who owns The Weeping Willow with her two daughters.

Ling and her husband, Anthony, said they believed having unique products in their store will draw in customers. Their goods, they say, can't be found at any big-box store, and the customers seem to know that.

"We've had people come by who were staying in Kennebunk or Wells, some people from out of state who were in town for lunch and decided to walk around," Ling said.

Even that shows how things have changed already, said her husband: "Five years ago, you wouldn't have seen that."

Biddeford, with a population of almost 22,000, has long suffered from a reputation of having a depressed downtown core, the result of a series of economic blows starting in the 1950s.

"We had a perfect storm," Weyland said, describing how the mill jobs all moved to Southern states at about the same time as downtown residents started moving out of the core area to suburban locations. The killing blow for many downtown shops came in 1971, when the Maine Mall opened and customers disappeared overnight.

"All of these shops down here were huge department stores," Weyland said.

Today, they are divided into a mix of residential units and small locally owned businesses. There is a mix of ethnic restaurants, bars and used-goods shops, plus a Pilates studio, a spa and a sushi bar. Still, many storefronts remain empty, or advertise the goods of a shop farther down Main Street.

Before the downturn, Biddeford was a vital, bustling place.

"Talk to anyone over the age of 50 and they'll tell you that on Friday and Saturday night this place was packed," Weyland said, waving her arm to take in the stretch of Main Street outside the City Theater. "You couldn't get by people on the sidewalks, it was so crowded."

The grant, she said, comes at the perfect time. There have been numerous studies in recent years supporting the idea of investing in downtowns, and two months ago the city commissioned a master plan for the hulking mill that dominates the eastern end of Main Street.

The mill, which houses a mix of light industrial and commercial businesses, is mostly empty. The entire mill district covers 32 acres of downtown property, and the buildings have 1.75 million square feet of floor space.

City Manager John Bubier said the grant would be particularly useful in "drawing together all the different components of the city."

"There is such diversity, from the point of view of incomes, of education, of expectations and ideology," he said. "Everyone who has come to Biddeford, is here because they want to be. We need to find out what attracted them and to engage them and explore how their skills can help plan for this community for the next 100 years."

"It's a dynamic process," Bubier said.

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