



City of Biddeford, Maine

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Mayor

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Biddeford is a wonderful city in which to live, work and play. Since the closing of the Maine Energy plant in 2012, a seismic shift has altered our psychological and physical landscape. I anticipate even greater changes, if we continue to be bold, preserve our history, invest in ourselves, and craft an environment where diversity is welcomed and creativity becomes our obsession.

Kevin Broydrick, of the Portland Phoenix newspaper, perfectly captured the new Biddeford when he recently wrote, "If I told you 20 years ago that Biddeford was on its way to becoming a culinary and cultural destination, you probably would have laughed me out of the room. But here we are in 2017 and the "Biddosance," as I like to call it, is in full swing. With outstanding food spots like Palace Diner and Custom Deluxe, galleries and boutiques moving into once-shuttered storefronts on Main Street, and, most importantly, the revitalization of derelict mill complexes, Biddeford has quickly become a hip place to visit."

Having grown up in Biddeford, I could not have predicted, 50 years ago, the renaissance of this old mill town. When I was young, the city was defined by huge brick structures in which my relatives and neighbors worked. Restaurants were few in number, and the arts were something that one read about in a magazine. The mills hummed with activity, and the downtown was alive with specialty stores like Butler's, Benoit's, McKenney & Heard, and Langevin's. Reilly's Bakery was a favorite stop, of mine, before heading to St. Mary's School, and Murphy's Music was where I discovered the Beatles.

Of course, we all know that a changing economy, the mall, a faulty incinerator, and multiple recessions changed all of that. For many, the erosion of jobs and stores became a mantra for all that was wrong with the city, and that mantra evolved into a perpetual sound track that could be used, over and over, as a political wrecking ball of despair and deceit. Things have changed. A few weekends ago, I was dining at Custom Deluxe with my wife. The place was busy, but most of the people were not from Biddeford. Next to us were seated a couple from Wells. They talked about how much they love visiting this city, because there are so many good things to eat and things to do.

Nearly every day, I am greeted by such comments. Biddeford is "hot", and people are moving here from other cities and towns, because of all our city now has to offer! This shift in perception is dramatic and notable. Biddeford is no longer an old, struggling mill town. It is hip. It is energetic. It is cutting edge. It is inviting! Today, we can all proudly say that Biddeford is truly "leading the way!"

What has triggered this perceptual change in this city: one in which people from afar are attracted to the urban, diverse feel?

A key component of the revitalization is the synergy that has developed between government and entrepreneurs. Biddeford is blessed with having many talented individuals who work for the city or who volunteer on the many boards, committees, and commissions. Collectively, their creativity and their commitment have fueled a metamorphosis, melding with the visions of the private sector. City councilors have been focused, positive, and willing to do what is necessary to improve our quality of life. Not intimidated by change, or unwilling to make hard decisions, they are impatient with stagnation and demand action.

The current council is especially significant because of its professionalism and objectivity. Under the able leadership of Council President John McCurry, councilors may disagree on various actions or policies, but they do so respectfully and not personally. They recognize and trust that their peers all have the ultimate goal of doing what is best for the city. They never allow political disagreements to blind themselves to future possibilities.

Rick Laverriere recently resigned from the council, but he was a superb representative for this city, for many years. His insights and his knowledge will be missed, but I am very confident that his replacement, Norman Belanger, will fill his shoes and maintain the high standards of professionalism that Rick always maintained.

When I became mayor, six years ago, a staff member told me that if I wanted to move this city forward, it was imperative to maintain decorum and professionalism in the public eye. Investors, he said, would not spend their dollars in a city that was politically volatile. Entrepreneurs seek stability for their investments, and governments that are rift with infighting are not desirable, not safe, especially in a competitive world in which all cities and towns are vying for businesses and jobs.

This council has been particularly adept at maintaining composure and professionalism, even when controversy has ensnared city issues and debate. Because of that posture and their focus on the future, the council has created an inviting atmosphere for investment dollars, and a community in which residents can be proud.

Our downtown is a prime example of our successes. Local restaurants have won national and regional accolades for their cuisine. Thriving businesses and shops have emerged from the recessionary rubble--Suger, Elements, Trillium, Lacava, Desert Moon, Banded Horn, Biscuits and Company, Cowbell, Uncorked --, and a new vitality and a "can do" spirit have invigorated the city. A farmer's market is thriving. Festivals like Winterfest and River Jam attract hundreds of people! The city has installed new lighting and sidewalks, and, during special events like the monthly Art Walk and Music in the Park, the downtown buzzes with conversation and laughter. This activity, of course, has accentuated the need for additional parking.

It is important to note all of the work that Doug Sanford has done with his mill properties. With grit and savvy determination, he breathed life into the old, empty mill buildings, and now they bustle with charm and amazing activity. Portland Pie, Round Turn Distillery, Hyperlite Mountain Gear, Impact Fitness, Sweetcream Dairy, Rabelais Books, Heartwood College of Art,

The Yard, and Angelrox are some of the eclectic businesses that exist behind the brick walls that line Main Street. Doug was Biddeford's revitalization pioneer. He believed in the possibilities of this city before anyone else understood its potential. Today, he continues to do amazing work. Parking is our albatross. Unless a parking structure is constructed, without using property tax dollars, maximum development of the mill spaces and downtown cannot occur. Even the vacant Maine Energy lot will become paralyzed by the parking issue, and the wave of development that we are witnessing will slow. Golden economic moments like this are rare in the history of any city, and we cannot allow ourselves to undercut this march of progress because we are too timid or too hamstrung with the past.

The construction of a garage is a tough decision. It is bold. It is controversial. It is costly. It is unlike anything that we have ever done, but doing nothing is not an option. It would be our greatest failure.

Similarly, five short years ago, there were naysayers who vehemently opposed the city's purchase of the Maine Energy site. Despite that controversy, the Council bravely voted 8-1 to buy the plant. The evidence of the correctness of that decision abounds: Dirigo Brewing, The Lofts at Saco Falls, The Lincoln Street Mill, the Pepperell Center. All investors in those projects were very clear: if Maine Energy had remained, their projects would not exist. Councilor Bob Mills has been steadfast and strong, working diligently to bring his ward, Ward 5, the mills and the downtown, back to life.

There is no mystery to the city's focus on the downtown, as, together with the mill district, it represents the greatest potential for increased tax revenue in this city. Since the closure of the incinerator, 100% of all downtown properties were sold at higher than the assessed values, and the average increase was 59%! Such revenues are essential in stabilizing the tax rate for all residents. In order to achieve that stabilization, maximum development of the mill district is essential. Without additional parking, there can be no maximum development, and any opportunity to discover new tax dollars and create jobs will evaporate.

A few months ago, two large entities decided not to come into the downtown because of the lack of guaranteed parking for their employees. Many small businesses, in the past five years, had already come to the same conclusion. We cannot continue to lose jobs and businesses because of a tragic infrastructure failure. It is costing us valuable tax dollars and restricting our potential. We need a garage, and we need it yesterday. Independent studies, in recent years, have confirmed the need for additional parking. It is time for this city to enter the 21st Century with the can-do attitude that blends private development with public sector improvements. We cannot simply insist that the private sector build that needed infrastructure. This new economy demands a partnership in which the private and public sectors become winners. Pride in our city demands action now.

Vibrant downtowns feed the fires of civic pride and build a sense of community! A vibrant downtown defines who we are as a people and is symbolic of our values and our dreams. What does it say to visitors when our City Hall clock tower remains dilapidated and in disrepair? Over a century ago, our forefathers constructed this magnificent structure, but their heirs, their guardians of community values, have left it to decay. Utilizing grants, public donations, and

capital funding, we must restore the tower in our historically registered building. We must recapture the majesty and beauty as designed by John Calvin Stevens, and demonstrate our desire to rekindle and magnify our determination to succeed and prosper.

This negligence is reflective of how we have, too often, systematically left costly repairs for future generations to pay, while conveniently ignoring the inevitable increased costs of those delays.

Many years ago, when I was a young councilor from Ward 5, a sewer issue occurred in the Five Points area. The cost was extravagant, over \$300,000. The Council decided to wait, in order to preserve a low tax rate. When the project was finally done, more than 10 years later, the cost was more than a million dollars.

Politically expedient low taxation, the failure to invest in infrastructure, and a particularly harmful recession have created the perfect storm of need! Whether it is our roads, our buildings, our bridges, our ice rink, our airport, our streets, our sidewalks, our parks, or our beaches, immediate action is needed, yet the dollars for such investment are limited. This city council, under the fiscal leadership of Councilors Marc Lessard and Stephen St. Cyr, has begun budgeting needed funds for capital projects, but independent auditors argue that more funds are needed. During the last budget cycle, a serious concern of the council and city auditors was the unfunded liabilities that were a result of long-standing employee benefits. As part of contract negotiations, and through the superb work of City Manager Jim Bennett, the city reduced this by \$5.5 million. The ignoring of city auditor recommendations to fully budget our reserve accounts has also been problematic for many years. Inadequate funding of such accounts triggered a reduction in our bond rating, but because this council responded to such concerns by increasing the necessary funding, and by reducing our liabilities, our bond rating has stabilized. However, any future failure to maintain such budgeting practices will induce additional rating penalties. To protect our fiscal integrity, we must consistently fund our surplus accounts and resist the convenient urge to underfund those accounts in order to protect the mil rate.

The funding of reserve accounts, in a world of limited tax dollars, places great pressure on our ability to fund services, salaries, repair infrastructure, and provide quality education. Because of the state's ongoing failure to adequately fund schools and revenue sharing, cities have been forced to rely more and more on the property tax to fund all aspects of government. Consequently, mil rates have become the focus and bane of property owners.

It is important to note that mill rates are not the sole culprit in one's property taxes. Property valuation is the other equal component in the tax formula, as defined by the state of Maine. One's property tax is a function of valuation and the mil rate, according to state law. The value of property varies from city to city. For example, a property in Kennebunkport possesses greater value than a similar property in Biddeford. Cities with high property valuations do not need high mil rates to generate their tax revenue in order to satisfy their total municipal budget. Cities with low valuation would need high mil rates in order to generate that exact same budgetary number. In order to get an accurate representation of the true value of taxation in a community, mil rates and valuation must be part of the discussion simultaneously and equally.

Education is an important element in our community growth and quality of life, yet it also consumes the majority share of the total city budget. Superintendent Jeremy Ray has been instrumental in transforming our school system. He has raised the morale of students and teachers; injected a more modern curriculum; installed a new administrative team; established collaborations with Dayton and Old Orchard Beach; led the charge for new start times for our students; saved this community thousands of dollars through budgetary vigilance and insight. Because of his leadership, the wisdom of the School Board, and our remarkable staff, our school system is, today, exceptional

That is not to say that there are no pending hurdles. With aid to education always being in the cross hairs of legislators and the governor, subsidy income remains tenuous. It is obvious to many that the mil rate cannot continue to sustain the explosive demands on education, in the face of inadequate state funding. Today, because of state mandates in terms of classroom size, special education, English as a Second Language, school construction, and testing, the cost of education continues to skyrocket. This could get dramatically worse, as the Governor has proposed to assign all administrative costs onto individual cities and towns.

Not surprisingly, compounding the problem is our failure to maintain buildings and fields. Six years ago, voters approved a \$34 million bond to renovate the high school, without any state funding. The result of that vote was an additional \$216 for every \$200,000 of property valuation onto your individual tax bills. The repairs had to be done, but the failure of the city to maintain that building was a culprit in the huge cost of the renovation.

Today, Waterhouse Field is facing a similar dilemma. Because of failures to invest in upgrades over the years, the facility now needs new lighting, new bleachers, and other field improvements. The potential cost could easily exceed \$2 million.

Waterhouse Field is iconic. It has long been symbolic of Tiger and community pride. While some have suggested that the field is inadequate and should be closed, I believe in preserving history as part of our unique culture. The cost for building of any new field will also be significant, but a new field will not possess the cultural and historical significance that is part of the social fabric of the facility. Quite simply, our student lacrosse, soccer, and football players need a place to play. We cannot simply ignore the problem. Losing Waterhouse Field would be a tragedy. We must invest in the field and restore it as the jewel of athletic competition. We need to find additional collaborations with our neighboring districts. I know that Superintendent Ray is up to that challenge. We also need to continue to modernize the Center of Technology, in order to deliver 21st Century skills to our students. In the wake of the devastating effects on families and education of opioid and alcohol addictions, we must determine how to best engage our students, after hours, with structure and learning that will tap into their individual sparks and talents.

Recently, I read an article about Iceland's expansion of after-school activities, in order to combat teen substance abuse. Ongoing data indicates providing teens with ample options for learning and pleasure dramatically reduces drug and alcohol consumption and stress.

Obviously, there is a huge cost in implementing such a program. There is also a huge cost in not taking action. I believe that this city, and the state of Maine, must begin investigative dialogues to determine the feasibility of expanding options for kids after school. The added stability that such programming can offer our students, as well as the building of self-confidence and self-esteem, will pay dividends in the future lives of these individuals. The status quo is not working for them, as evidenced by the drug use, the alcohol abuse, the stress, the depression, the anxiety, and the bad behavior that we are observing state-wide. Fortunately, people like Councilor Laura Seaver, who once served on the School Board, and who has professional experience in this area, has the ability and experience to work with at-risk students and recognize the tools that are needed to secure their future and hopes.

With all of the monetary pressures on financing city government, how do we craft a fair budget that is sensitive to those who are on fixed incomes or who do not see any benefits from an improved economy in their weekly paycheck? How do we balance the failures of state government to adequately fund education and revenue sharing, with the pressures of providing services, repairing our infrastructure, and satisfying the recommendations of our auditors? Efficiency is one option. I have been very pleased to see how well the cities of Biddeford and Saco have worked together in recent years. Both councils have been emphatic in their desire to save valuable tax dollars, while breaking down old barriers that once limited mutual collaborations. Councilors Ready and Swanton have been firm and active supporters of this initiative, and Mayor Ron Michaud has demonstrated that he is a good friend of this community, as he is enthusiastic for developing new opportunities.

During the past year, both councils passed a common ordinance which demands two yearly combined meetings, and a joint council sub-committee has been meeting monthly. Additionally, staff from both cities are engaged in dialogue with their peers, looking for cost-saving opportunities. In this past year alone, we have begun the sharing of an assessor, while conversations go forward with other possibilities.

Can we do more? Perhaps, but the process is slow because of different unions, different contracts, different histories, and different needs. Additionally, and most importantly, any collaboration **MUST** be in the best interests of both parties.

We also must continue to work closely with our natural partners: UNE, the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the Heart of Biddeford, and SMHC. In terms of economic development, the downtown, education, business retention, and healthcare, these entities are essential to all of the progress that we will achieve.

UNE, under the leadership of President Danielle Ripich, has become an exceptional partner in the community, and a world class leader in education and research. President Ripich is retiring, and I want to thank her for all that she has done for our city. Because of her vision, more students are involved in volunteering, in our parks, in our schools, on our streets, and in our theater. Our students have greater access to the facilities at UNE, and professors from the university have become very involved with our dredging project, our river protection, and in our public health. UNE is not only a huge economic engine, but it is an undeniable asset in our quest for quality of life.

Very few communities have the availability and assistance of two superb organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and Heart of Biddeford. Led by Craig Pendleton and Delilah Poupore, both entities contribute thousands of volunteer hours in making our city economically viable and attractive. They are not only involved in attracting businesses, but also in creating the necessary environment to entice people to visit and participate. Not just satisfied with providing the ideas and vision for economic growth, these organizations also provide the “can-do” spirit and tenacity that helps to motivate our community. These two organizations, quite frankly, are the backbone in creating a better Biddeford. They are always there when we need them.

Author Tom Wolfe once spoke of how cities can be reborn through the arts, as opposed to the factory jobs that dominated the industrial landscapes many years ago. In what he called the new “psychological economy”, Wolfe said that “money is exchanged for an experience, not a product. You bring home nothing—except an experience, a gratification.”

Such words resonate in Biddeford. The old jobs in the cotton mills and shoe factories will not be coming back, so how do we adapt to these new economic realities? Many years ago, Tammy Ackerman introduced the arts into the vernacular of Biddeford’s downtown. The results have been amazing, as more and more artists and galleries have found a niche in the city, and their presence has become a catalyst for bringing more people and businesses into the area.

Glass artist Joseph Webber will soon be opening a studio in the mills. He will be displaying his art and teaching glassblowing classes. He came to the mills because of the affordability of space, but also because of the “growing community of artists and makers.”

Andrew Taylor, who is opening a new commissary kitchen for Eventide in the Pepperell Mill campus recently said, “Biddeford, as a whole, has been an interesting and compelling town. We feel like Biddeford has a lot going on, and we are excited to be here.” He added that he believes that the mills were a perfect place for his business and that his “employees can...have a ton of pride in working” in those old and beautiful buildings. The affordability of space and the relocation of some of his acquaintances from the Portland area were also determiners in his decision.

Brooklyn designer Roxi Suger and her husband Julian Schlaver similarly moved here because for the “creative vibe, Biddeford was a no-brainer. (It) has that raw power and creative spirit-but enough grit to keep it going.” Giving back to Biddeford, Roxi and Julian, each year, coordinate the Biddeford Ball which donates raised funds to various charities. A few years ago, part of those funds were allocated to the lighting of the large brick smokestack in the mill district. “At night, now we have an iconic little monument, if you will, to the history of Biddeford and the industrial history of America in New England.”

Celia Blue Johnson, a local writer and editor, commented that in Biddeford, “the scene is constantly growing...I love the energy. The town is packed with artisans.” The city “has so many talented people packed into one town...well, it feels like Brooklyn, but without the impossibly high rent.”

When we look elsewhere, whether Kennebunkport, Portsmouth, or the Old Port, Wolfe's "experience" is readily apparent. People visit those areas because of their ambiance, their beauty, and their diversity. Biddeford too can reclaim a spot on the places to visit, specifically because of its inherent assets.

A few years ago, a professor from the west coast visited me in my office. He was doing research on mill buildings, and he was overjoyed and amazed by the architecture and vastness of the brick mills that he saw in this city. His enthusiasm was contagious, as he raved about the possibilities and beauty.

For many of us who grew up in the shadow of the mill complexes, the professor's excitement might seem a bit odd. Because the mills were always there, always here, and because they were associated with hard work and long hours, they were often seen in a negative context by many. Today, however, visitors who have no past connection to the mills are awed and fascinated by what they see! To them, the mills are Wolfe's "experience", and they are fully willing to spend their dollars in exchange for that special moment. It is that "experience" that we must, as a city, capture and utilize in this new economy, as we continue to reinvent ourselves and preserve the vitality that is now, more and more, becoming part of the "buzz" in our downtown.

Perfectly located between Portland and Portsmouth, Biddeford possesses beaches, parks, a river, a theater, an airport, a hospital, a library, a university, industrial parks, and a superb school system. It also features remarkable architecture, magnificent mill buildings, and a long, rich history. We have all of the unique characteristics that can make this city special and desirable, and I believe that we are moving in the right direction to accentuate those positives, create the particular experiences needed in this new economy, and thus resurrect and sustain prosperity. Our economic foundation, of course, is also buttressed by the established, dynamic businesses that we have in our community. Carolyn Brodsky, of Sterling Rope; Derek Volk, of Volk Packaging; Brian Haley, of Haley's Metal; Rob Tillotson, of Oak Point Associates ; C.D. Armstrong of Deering Lumber are some of the individuals who have provided good jobs and good products for many years, and their presence in this city is appreciated and respected. Of course, I recognize that possessing the needed assets is not a guarantee of success. As a community, we must invest the necessary sweat equity to maximize the gifts of our assets and the possibilities that they may unleash! We need the courage to take risks, preserve our history, invest in ourselves, and create an environment where diversity is welcomed and creativity becomes our lifeblood.

What occurred this weekend, at Winterfest, is a wonderful example of building community. Because of the volunteers and donors, the event was a tremendous family experience. The construction of the sliding area, by members of the New Life Church, and coordinated by Larry Patoine, was amazing, and it triggered landslides of laughter and giggles from the many children who braved its speed and height. Volunteers also manned the West Brook Skating Rink, and assisted at the City Theater for the two performances. The act of giving back is foundational to the development of community spirit, and I want to thank all who lent their time, expertise, and dollars, in making Winterfest 2017, so special.

In building community bridges, Winterfest took a page from our city's landmark festival, La Kermesse. Since its founding, Kermesse has given back to the community, through its numerous

volunteers, in terms of culture and history. Individuals like Paul Gagne, Joe Leblond, and Ray Gagne, have been donating their time for years, and Jessica Quattrone, as President, has ably assumed that role. With the festival now back on St. Louis Field, it is important for us to remember our heritage, our roots, no matter where our families may have originated. Our diversity makes us special, in so many ways.

During the Thanksgiving holiday, I traveled, with Patti, to Quebec City. On the way, I stopped in St-Georges to meet with Mayor Claude Morin, as St-Georges is Biddeford's sister city. He and I have been talking about reestablishing our cultural and educational relationships. Later, that weekend, I met with Quebec City's Deputy Mayor, Michelle Morin-Doyle in order to discuss the Francophone and Francophile Cities Network. By being part of this organization, Biddeford will have a free genealogical connection with Quebec City and will be able to use the organization as part of greater cultural tourism planning.

Being Franco, I believe that it is important to know more of the Franco experience, and I think that it is similarly important, in any city, for residents to know of their ethnicity in order to greater appreciate the history and the culture that has become part of the community fabric. La Kermesse has been part of that process for many years, and I believe that as part of our economic revival, we need to open our doors to more cultural awakenings.

Not all is perfect in our city. Like all communities, there are things that need our attention. The opioid crisis is such an issue. A plague that is devastating cities across America, the effects of addiction have caused much heartache in our community. A few years ago, I met with Professor Ed Bilsky of UNE to consider a way to best approach this cancer. What I discovered was that there was no simple solution: that a multi-targeted approach was necessary.

Numerous meetings were held with members of law enforcement, treatment providers, educational specialists, recovery experts, staffers from the offices of Senators King and Collins, and city officials from Biddeford, Saco, and Old Orchard. In recent months, a number of significant actions have taken place. The cities of Biddeford and Saco collaboratively obtained a state grant to deal with this issue, and today, a coordinator is on the job, assisting police officers in connecting affected individuals and their families to resources and services needed for recovery.

The Coastal Healthy Communities Coalition and Project Alliance, under the leadership of Bill Paterson of UNE, have assumed directorship of the Bilsky group. This allows for proper funding and staffing, and a focus on education, prevention and understanding. Project Alliance and the CHCC are supported by grants from the federal Drug Free Communities Program, and its programs include marijuana summits, Project Sticker Shock, and technical assistance to schools. Similarly, the Rotary Club, under the leadership of Jim Godbout, operates the Red Ribbon Committee which has also interjected dollars and educational programming into the schools. Jim has been a steadfast, energetic advocate for treatment and recovery, and his work has been inspirational.

Lastly, thanks to the creativity of Chief Roger Beaupre, the Biddeford Police Department has instituted a Street Crimes Unit, which uses street-level intelligence in order to stop and undercut

criminal behavior, including drug trafficking and human trafficking. It's work, quite frankly, has been remarkable.

Of course, behind the scenes of all that we discuss are the doctors, nurses, and staff of Southern Maine Health Care. President Ed McGeachey has worked tirelessly in the field of health care for many years, and he has assembled a skilled and able staff that has helped thousands of patients in southern Maine. In the battle of opioids, the hospital is always there, for leadership, information, and coordination.

I was very sad to learn a few months ago, that Professor Ed Bilsky had resigned his position at UNE and had accepted a new position on the west coast. Giving of their talents and their time, Ed, his wife, and his children have been very involved in building community. His efforts in dealing with the opioid crisis have been monumental. I wish him the very best in his new career. We need more hands reaching out to those in need, and more hearts opening to those who hurt, in order to bridge the many problems that face cities in the 21st Century. Too many of our people are cut out of the progress that is being made because of age, gender, disabilities, and ethnicity. Loneliness is confronted daily by many who live here, and isolation is a trap for others. This past year, the city became designated as an Age Friendly Community which will eventually provide opportunities of enrichment for many of our residents, and under the leadership of Guy Gagnon, work continues in the establishment of a teen center in our urban core. Councilor Bob Quattrone has been working hard to secure greater accessibility and opportunities for disabled children, and he has been a strong presence in helping those who are in need.

Hunger is a serious issue for many in our community. A few years ago, I helped one of our pantries in the distribution of food. The number of elderly who were collecting their breads, fruits, and vegetables saddened me, especially because I knew some of them. The people in that line were our friends, our neighbors, and perhaps our relatives. We need to do more. Our local food pantries and their associated volunteers are giving every day, helping those who have fallen through the cracks of our economy, but we need more of you to step up to the plate and to give back, because that is what being a community is truly all about.

Of particular concern to me is the caustic polarization that exists, within our community, within, our nation, and within our state in terms of politics. Political debate, too often, degenerates into a quagmire of demonization and stereotyping among those of differing points of view. The proliferation of social media and fake news has tragically exacerbated the situation. A friend of mine, who is very familiar with politics throughout the state, pulled me aside, recently, and told me that while Biddeford's politics are unique, our city, in all his years of watching government, is the only one in which individuals are completely willing to throw the entire city under the bus in order to gain their own political advantage.

It was not always that way. When I entered politics in the 1970's, there were political factions who vociferously argued their points of view, but they never made it personal. In the late 1980's, that air of respect evaporated. Insults and personal attacks trumped political debate. In recent years, because of the invasion of social media, all rules of civic engagement and respect have evaporated, as faces hidden behind a computer find power that is unattainable to them under the scrutiny of the public eye.

We need to stop throwing each other under the bus. We need to learn to address issues and not personalities. We need to transcend the pettiness that could harm our economic revival. We need to not only talk, but learn how to listen.

As part of improving dialogue, it is essential that the city continues to improve its transparency and communication with residents. In the past year, a new online publication was created, the Biddeford Beat, which gives weekly updates of essential news. Staff, city councilors, and myself, are attempting to become more engaged on Twitter, and there have also been tweaks and modifications to the city's website, with the goal of improving accessibility.

I believe that even more work needs to be done. When I first became involved in local politics, there were three major newspapers that regularly reported on city happenings: the Journal Tribune, the York County Coast Star, and the Portland Press Herald. Eventually, the Biddeford Saco Courier became a staple of political reading, with the arrival of David Flood into our community. All the papers had full time reporters who daily worked the Biddeford beat. The result of such reporting was a wealth of information that could be streamed every day to residents. Of course, essentially all adults in that era read newspapers. Because of changing demographics and economics, newspapers do not have the same hold on the distribution of factual information. With the proliferation of fake news, I believe the city needs to fill that void by providing trustworthy information and data, on a daily basis, so that more and more people can know exactly what is occurring in city hall, as opposed to reading rumor and innuendo on social media. After all, good government is a byproduct on an informed electorate.

There is so much more that can be done to enhance our city. As part of the downtown revitalization, I believe that the city must invest and complete the RiverWalk project in the upcoming year, and link Mechanic's Park to the Diamond National property. Accessible and scenic riverfronts are known catalysts of economic rebirth. The Saco River Falls is majestic and magnificent, and for too many years, it was hidden from the eyes of most local residents. Those who have walked the Pedestrian Bridge, or who have seen the Falls from Dirigo Brewing recognize the beauty and power of the river, and they understand that the river is the majestic jewel of the downtowns of Biddeford and Saco.

We must also work closely with Saco to consider the possible creation of a new train station and a transportation center within our combined mill district. At our recent joint council meeting, significant conversation dealt with traffic flow and congestion. I believe we should explore the possibilities of moving people more efficiently through the development of an efficient, modern, and convenient system of busing and trains.

As part of our collaboration with Saco, we must continue to pressure the federal government to secure the funds needed to dredge the Saco River. Both communities are losing hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential economic activity because our river is filled with debris and sand. That is unacceptable. We need federal dollars to open the areas of channel so that commercial and recreational boats can freely navigate the waterway.

Safe, affordable housing is of particular concern to the council. Because of a saturated housing market in Portland, the price of residential and commercial spaces in Biddeford is increasing.

This puts great pressure on our working families. Additionally, much of the housing stock in Biddeford is old and in need of repair. In the past year, the city has begun a systematic inspection of all downtown buildings to update its inventory of living spaces, and to prevent deadly fires.

Neighborhoods must be stable for all residents of this community, no matter what section of town in which they might live. We need to draft the necessary ordinances to protect our residents and eliminate blight.

No matter what we do, the objective must be to continue in the creation of a city that will meet the needs and the wants of future generations. We are not building for today, but for tomorrow. To do that, we need all hands on deck. We need more people to become active on committees, commissions, and in volunteering. Arm chair quarterbacking does not determine the outcome of the game. That game is won in the trenches, on a day to day level of discussion, debate, and implementation. We live in a remarkable community, but the best is still yet to come.