

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —



POPULATION: 21,000

CHALLENGE:
Economic development

FOCUS: Downtown
development plan

KEY TOOL: Story
gathering

BIDDEFORD, MAINE

Long struggling textile mill town, Biddeford (pop. 21,000), had come to be defined by an industrial trash incinerator in the center of town. But the facility represented 80 jobs and was a major taxpayer.

Through Community Heart & Soul®, residents set change in motion by showing city leaders that there was strong support for tearing the incinerator down. The city purchased the plant, tore it down, and that sparked revitalization.

Biddeford by the numbers:

90 million—the dollar value of new and approved projects as of 2016.

34—median age compared to 45 statewide, reflecting an influx of younger people.

1.6 million—the amount of textile mill space downtown.

400,000—the square footage of occupied space in the textile mills (out of 1.6 million square feet) before Heart & Soul®, and the amount of *available* square footage six years after Heart & Soul.

60—the average percent that commercial real estate has increased in value since 2014.



BIDDEFORD, MAINE

From Trash Town to Leading the Way

On the decline for decades, and with the last textile company closing in 2009, this historic mill town faced stagnant population growth and limited job opportunities. In recent years, the city's image came to be defined by a trash incinerator downtown, earning it the unsavory moniker: "Trash Town."

The town's Community Heart & Soul® project, Heart of Biddeford, focused on creating a downtown development plan. Instead of taking the typical approach to gathering public input, Heart of Biddeford, set out to hear from residents from all walks of life in a variety of ways including:

- Gathering stories from residents, which highlighted the history and uniqueness of the city;
- Engaging high school students in recording stories from family members, many of whom worked in the mills, which brought the city's history to life and instilled pride;
- Creating "HeartSpots" where residents could phone in stories and memories related to specific downtown sites.

As stories were collected, it became clear that downtrodden residents rediscovered pride of place and did not support the incinerator, even though shuttering it meant losing 80 jobs and revenue from the largest taxpayer.

With community support, the city council approved spending \$6.7 million to buy the plant and tear it down. This potentially risky move turned out to be a catalyst for change. Since that happened:

- Biddeford had \$90 million in approved projects in the pipeline, including a \$50 million boutique hotel and \$15 million in affordable housing.
- Vacancy on Main Street has dropped dramatically.
- The business and industrial parks are nearly full.
- Commercial real estate values downtown have averaged a 60 percent increase in value. Residential values are up by 12 percent.
- Only 400,000 square feet of textile mill space is available out of a total square footage of 1.6 million. Before Heart & Soul, only 400,000 square feet were occupied.

Biddeford's new tag line reflects the pride the community has for its town: Biddeford, Leading the Way.

The Orton Family Foundation is focused on **building stronger, healthier, and more economically vibrant** small cities and towns across America. Our resident-driven model recognizes the value in the unique character of each place and the emotional connection of the people who live there.



Visit orton.org to learn how Community Heart & Soul® can empower your town to shape the future based on what matters most.