

# Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —



**POPULATION:** 5,700

**CHALLENGE:**  
Revitalizing local economy, increasing civic engagement

**FOCUS:** Involving the community in comprehensive planning

**KEY TOOL:**  
Action Plan & Duct Tape Council

## GARDINER, MAINE

Gardiner was hard hit by the steady decline of manufacturing in Maine, losing employers, jobs, and population. In 2002, hoping to reverse the city's fortunes, Gardiner built a business park near the highway. It never filled and amassed more than \$1 million in debt.

Civic life was also anemic. City council meetings were characterized by a few angry residents showing up to yell and complain. When there were three seats open on the council, only two people ran. Seats on city committees went unfilled.

In 2012 the city decided to focus on Community Heart & Soul in partnership with Gardiner Main Street and the Gardiner Board of Trade.

### Gardiner by the numbers:

#### Before Community Heart & Soul

**14%**—decline in Gardiner's population from 2000 to 2010.

**\$1 million**—amount of debt for the city-owned business park

#### After Community Heart & Soul

**\$1.9 million**—amount of Community Development Block Grant funds invested in five new businesses

**55**—number of jobs created as part of the CDBG investment



# GARDINER, MAINE

The seven mills that lined the Cobbossee Stream in Gardiner, Maine, were monuments to the city's industrial legacy. Here the shoe, textile, fabrication, and paper industries thrived until the latter half of the 20th century. Now, the mill buildings are gone or reduced to rubble. One thousand jobs went with them.

The decline continued into the 21st century. One of Gardiner's remaining major employers went out of business, a loss of 141 jobs. A candle company left town siphoning away another 70 jobs. Population continued to slide, dropping 14 percent while the county population grew 5 percent.

Hoping to reverse Gardiner's fortunes, the city built a business park. It never filled. A \$5.7 million expansion failed to solve the problem. Half of the lots weren't sold and debt mounted to more than \$1 million.

Civic life was also anemic. City council meetings were characterized by a few angry residents showing up to yell and complain. When three seats opened on the city council, only two people ran.

In 2012, the city decided to focus on Community Heart & Soul® in partnership with Gardiner Main Street and the Gardiner Board of Trade. The project aimed to help update the city's comprehensive plan, a process that would unfold over time. Results, however, began to happen right away. There was renewed interest in local government and volunteering. Eight people ran for three seats on the city council. Interest in serving on committees grew. More people attended council meetings, and the tenor of meetings changed as discourse was more civil.

As Gardiner Heart & Soul concluded, a "Duct Tape Council" was created to ensure that the Action Plan came to fruition. Immediate changes included waterfront concerts, volunteers planting flowers, Heart & Soulmate awards celebrating resident involvement in the community.

Changes that evolved over a longer timeframe included economic development. Gardiner began to reinvent itself as a food hub for regional agriculture with meat processing facilities and a food co-op retail store to market locally grown food. Here are some of the results:

- **Five Community Development Block Grants** totaling \$1.9 million sparked investment and created 55 jobs.
- **Gardiner Growth Initiative**—invested in 5 retail establishments with incentives including forgivable loans, free rent, and grants.

**“If you really want to take an in-depth look at what matters to the members of your community and create a stronger, more cohesive community, Heart & Soul's the way to go.”**

Thom Harnett, former mayor Gardiner

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](http://orton.org) to learn how Community Heart & Soul® can empower your town to shape the future based on what matters most.