

# Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

## BIDDEFORD, MAINE

A 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.

POPULATION:  
21,000

CHALLENGE:  
Economic  
development

FOCUS:  
Downtown  
development plan

KEY TOOL:  
Story gathering

### Biddeford “by the numbers”:

- \$90 million value of new and approved economic development projects as of 2016.
- 34 – the median age compared to 45 statewide, reflecting an influx of younger people.
- 1.6 million square feet of textile mill space downtown.
- 400,000 square feet of occupied space in the textile mills (out of 1.6 million square feet) before Heart & Soul®, and the amount of available square feet six years after Heart & Soul.
- 60% average percent increase in value of commercial real estate since 2014.

### Local conditions:

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."



## Volunteer and Community Response:

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.

## Heart & Soul Outcomes:

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".