

# Community Heart & Soul®

*Guided by what matters most*

## 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.

POPULATION:  
5,700

CHALLENGE:  
Revitalize local  
economy, increase  
resident  
engagement

FOCUS: Involving  
the community

KEY TOOL:  
Comprehensive  
Planning and  
increased  
volunteerism

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 in debt for the city-owned business park

#### After Community Heart & Soul

- \$1.9 million Community Development Block Grant funds invested in five new businesses
- 55 new jobs created as part of the CDBG investment

### Local conditions:

The seven mills that lined the Cobbsesee 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.

In 2002, hoping to reverse Gardiner's fortunes, the city built a business park. It never filled and amassed more than \$1 million in debt.

Civic life was also weak. 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.

## **Volunteer and Community Response:**

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.

## **Heart & Soul Outcomes:**

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.
- The Comprehensive Plan was finalized in 2014 by involving everyone and is still an active tool guiding the development of Gardiner.
- The City Council has the community’s Heart & Soul Statements posted in its meeting room which are referred to whenever important decisions are considered.
- Residents created a “Duct Tape Council” comprised of volunteers to implement and steward the actions identified through the Heart & Soul process.

*"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

