

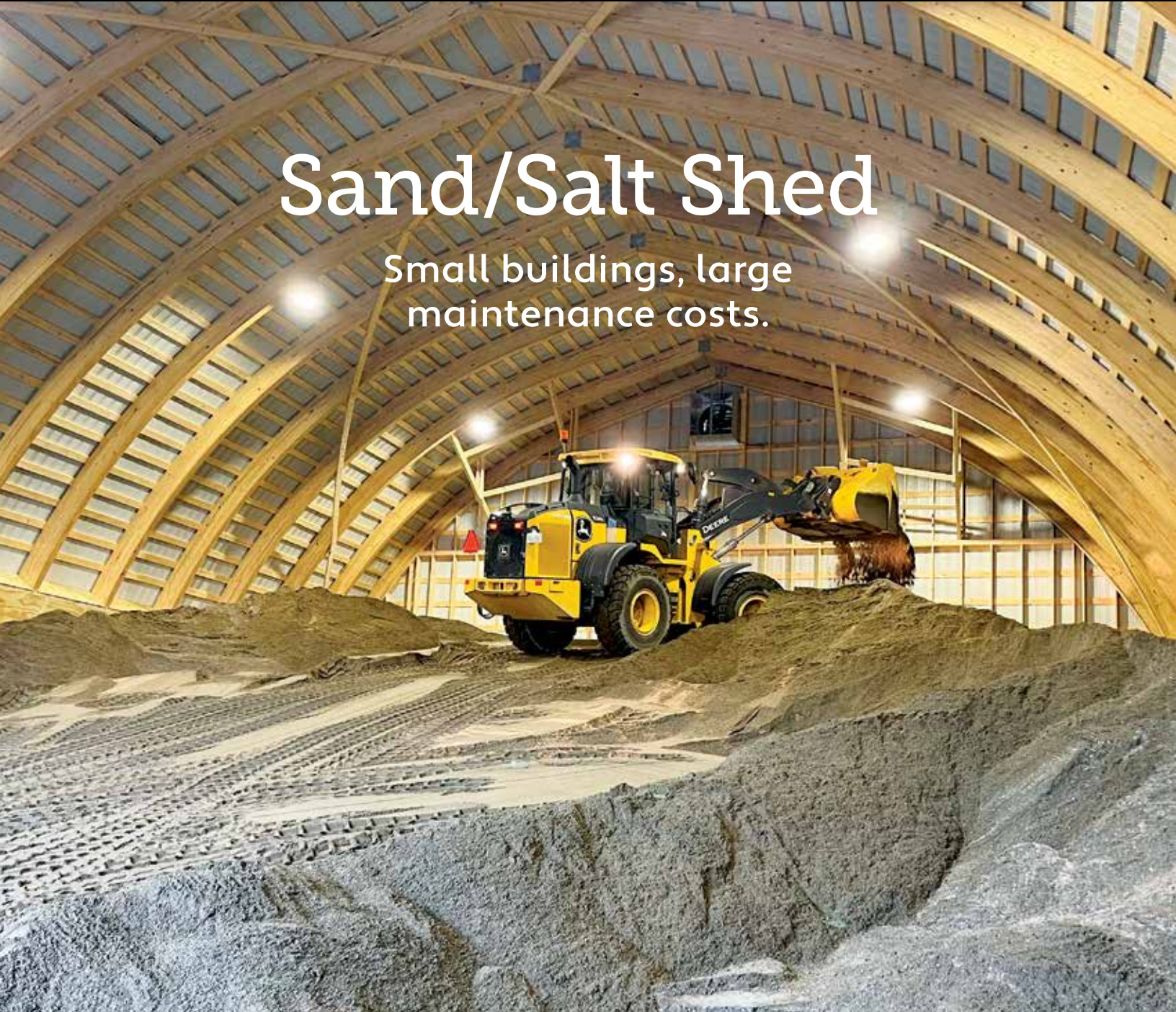
Maine Town & City

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Sand/Salt Shed

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maintenance costs.



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Damariscotta Pumpkinfest (Contributed photo)

Community Heart & Soul

A successful process for getting all interested parties involved in building a sense of community.

By Stephanie Bouchard

At three a.m. one morning, Luke Dyer's eyes popped open. Wakening at three isn't unusual for Dyer, nor are all the ideas and questions ping-ponging in his brain. What was on the mind of Van Buren's town manager this particular morning was the urgent need to engage his community.

How to engage residents is a question on the minds of municipal leaders across the country, says Mark Sherman, president of the nonprofit community engagement organization, Community Heart & Soul.

"We see [the lack of community engagement] all over the country," he says. From the organization's experience, the drivers of low community engagement are inertia—compounded by the isolation of the pandemic—and the current divisive political environment.

"There's so much hostility and conflict that a process like Community Heart & Soul is a wonderful antidote," he says. "Instead of coming in and focusing on what's broken and having a lot of charged conversations that are kind of grievance oriented, we're just the opposite. We flip the script and we focus on what everybody cares about."

That focus—on the things that people love about their community instead of what they don't like—caught Luke Dyer's attention on that pre-dawn morning as he scrolled through the internet looking for a community engagement framework that would work in his Aroostook County hometown.

The town of Van Buren is in the midst of revitalizing its downtown and looking forward to its future. It has received several grants to help the town achieve its goals,

but the specter of what happened in other communities that were in similar positions as Van Buren's had Dyer worried.

Dyer, a former police sergeant for the town of 2,000, had learned that other communities who had gotten grants like the ones Van Buren was now benefitting from ran into trouble from residents when the plans that had been labored over were criticized and even shot down.

Those places hadn't involved their community members in the process, and they paid a price for it. Dyer was determined that Van Buren wouldn't suffer the same fate.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," he says. "I started searching the internet, looking for a model that we could follow—how to do our own community workshops—something that we could follow that I thought would keep us from getting in that same situation—where we wouldn't suddenly find ourselves on the defensive."

It was during that early morning search that he found Community Heart & Soul. Its grassroots emphasis looked promising to Dyer, and best of all, it had a proven track record of working with communities in Maine.

A town divided sparks an idea

Vermont-headquartered Community Heart & Soul grew out of an experience with small town municipal government. Founder Lyman Orton, who is one of the co-owners of the Vermont Country Store, served on his hometown's planning commission. While the planning commission always invited residents to its meetings, few went.

Usually, the lack of resident engagement didn't result in big problems, until one particular business proposal

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passed by the commission created a controversy that divided the town's residents and resulted in yearslong bad feelings.

From this painful experience, Orton recognized that while the commission had only been doing its job, maybe all the misery that followed could have been avoided if the community had been more involved from the beginning of the process. But how to get more community engagement stumped him.

It would take many years before Orton formed Community Heart & Soul as a model for engaging communities in towns with a population under 30,000. Today, the organization has helped communities across the country. More than a dozen of those communities are in Maine.

As Van Buren's Luke Dyer read through the experiences of the towns in Maine, he was encouraged by what he learned. A coach trained in the Community Heart & Soul process is hired by the community to engage the entire community in identifying what community members love about their community, what future they want for it, and how they will achieve it.

Dyer contacted the organization, who put him in touch with a Maine-based coach. The initial visit with the coach went well, and the town applied for a Seed Grant from Community Heart & Soul. The Seed Grant is a matching grant. Community Heart & Soul provides \$10,000 and the community must put in \$10,000.

The grant can be used to cover any expenses related to the Community Heart & Soul process, such as the fee charged by the coach. Community Heart & Soul doesn't charge for its program, explains Sherman, but communities do pay a fee to the coach, who is an independent contractor. The fee is negotiated between the coach and the community.

Last fall, Van Buren's grant application was approved and the town held its first Heart & Soul community meeting right away. The town is taking its matching contribution from its economic development budget, and is splitting the amount into two payments over two years.

"Our first community meeting was just to identify stakeholders in our community—who are the clubs, who are the organizations—who are the main players in our community that can help contribute to this revitalization? I was crossing my fingers hoping 12 people would show up to this meeting," says Dyer.

"We had over 30 people attend, and it was standing room only. The room actually wasn't big enough. That was quite an eye opener—more of the community than we think wants to be involved in these decisions."

The community comes out

Dyer's experience mirrors that of many of the other Maine communities that have gone through the Community Heart & Soul process.

After Bucksport's largest employer closed in 2014, the town was determined it would not only survive the shuttering of the paper mill, but would figure out a way to thrive, says town manager Sue Lessard, who began her tenure with the Hancock County town in 2015.

A resident had seen a Community Heart & Soul presentation and gave Lessard one of the nonprofit's brochures. Town council approved funds to get the process started and soon, they'd hired a part-time coordinator. "It's not a government-driven program," Lessard says. "All we provided was money."

The coordinator and a committee of volunteers drove the process, opening up an office in an empty storefront on Main Street, holding block parties to interact with residents, and getting local students to interview members of the community about the things that were important to them about Bucksport.

What came out of the process was a list of more than 80 projects community members wanted to see happen in town and a list of value statements that guide town council to this day. "[The value statements are] posted in our council chamber," Lessard says, "so when we're looking through things sometimes [we ask ourselves] 'Is this



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Bucksport Heart & Soul (Contributed photo)



Gardiner Heart & Soul (Photo by Nancy Barron)

consistent with the values that the community has said are important to it/us?”

And those 80-plus projects aren’t the council’s or town staff’s responsibility, she notes. Part of the Community Heart & Soul process is to bring community members together at the end of the process to approve an action plan, Mark Sherman explains. Often, at that meeting, people can sign up for the projects they’re interested in, and the organizations and businesses from the community offer to spearhead and manage projects, too.

That’s what happened in western Maine, when a network of nonprofits picked up the reins of nearly 90 projects that came out of the Mahoosuc Heart & Soul process.

The towns of Bethel, Greenwood, Newry and Woodstock, and the townships of Albany and Mason partnered together to form Mahoosuc Heart & Soul in 2016. “We were networked together,” says Christine Landes, then the town manager in Bethel and now the town manager in Chelsea. “We wanted to make this region one that people wanted to improve and make it so that it’s attractive and it offers what people want to continue to live here, continue to thrive, continue to visit.”

The Mahoosuc volunteers did lots of small functions to engage the community, and even left out special drink coasters at local bars so that everyone—even visitors going to the region’s ski resorts—could use them to write down what they loved about the area. “It really became a fun project for a lot of volunteers,” she says.

Making it stick

Once the 18 to 24 month Community Heart & Soul process is completed, that’s not the end. Projects that come out of the process get picked up by community

groups and partners, the value statements developed help inform comprehensive plans, the new connections made become long-term relationships, and those who participated take what they’ve learned into other areas of their lives.

In the coastal Lincoln County town of Damariscotta, it’s been more than 15 years since the town went through the Community Heart & Soul process. The value statements the town created during that process still grace the walls of town hall and continue to drive projects in town, says Steven Hufnagel, executive director of Damariscotta-based nonprofit, Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust.

“The process was really solid and it gave rise to a new way of doing things, and I think that’s continued,” he says. “There’s more reaching out; that’s become the norm.”

Hufnagel was an active participant in the town’s Community Heart & Soul process, and even applies what he learned to his work at Coastal Rivers.

“That public engagement way of thinking has really fed into what we do,” he says. “Where we can understand better what that public interest really is in a more comprehensive and robust way, that makes our work that much more relevant, that much more true to that public nature of the goal.”

While Van Buren is at the beginning of its community engagement process, Luke Dyer is hopeful, that like in Damariscotta and other Maine towns, it’ll have legs. It’s still early days, but things look encouraging. That first community meeting “was a very, very positive meeting,” he says. The goal going forward, he says, is “[Making] sure the community is getting what they want; it’s not just the government saying, ‘Okay, we’re doing this.’”