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## **2020 Augusta City Council Goals and Strategies (Second Draft)**

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## 2020 AUGUSTA CITY COUNCIL GOALS AND STRATEGIES

(second draft)

### INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, January 21, 2020, members of the Augusta City Council, staff, and partner organizations met in the Augusta Civic Center for a 6-hour goal-setting session. The session was written up by staff, then revised and approved by the Council as a whole. With this as background, here are the City's major goals for 2020.

### GOAL 1: Gain Approval for a New Police Station, and Plan for Future Major Capital Improvements.

**Background to Police Station:** Augusta's police officers need a new station. They need a station that meets all of the operational needs of the police force. They need a station that has a design that communicates the connection of the City police and the community. On these points all Council members are in strong agreement. But the challenges are significant. The need for a new station is not well understood by the public. The site, design, costs, and fiscal strategy have yet to be finalized. All of this must be done by the springtime in order to present a persuasive bond question to Augusta voters in June.



#### **Strategy 1A: Conduct a thorough, timely, and transparent Police Station planning process.**

*Councilors want:*

- *to have a workshop in February with up-to-date information on police department needs, site options, cost options, spin-off neighborhood benefits of each site, and a fiscal strategy for financing the station without an undue impact on future property tax rates*
- *to hold public meetings on both sides of the River, and to particularly engage with immediate neighbors, to communicate the current situation and to get feedback.*
- *to make a decision on the best site, and*
- *to then re-engage with the architect and design team to make final design, cost, and financing decisions.*

**Background to School Facilities:** Funding for a Hussey School replacement is slowly moving up the state priority list (now at #9). While timing is never certain, it is possible that Hussey will rise to funding eligibility in as few as two years. When Hussey is eligible, the City needs to respond quickly in order to secure the funding. This means that planning and community participation must begin in 2020.



The issue of Hussey replacement raises many issues. The State likes to see consolidated schools – perhaps one K-6 school for the whole of Augusta. On the other hand, elementary schools are an important contributor to neighborhood quality, and for this reason one elementary school on each side of the river, walkable from nearby neighborhoods, is desirable. One possibility would be to use Gilbert and Farrington campuses for new or rehabilitated elementary classrooms. Then there is the issue of special needs students, a growing population in Augusta schools; are they better served by one consolidated school where a full range of special

services can be based? Another issue is whether the City or private contributors will be asked to contribute additional funds to enhance the building, as was done in order to build the much-used Cony High School auditorium.

**Strategy 1B: Create a City/School Department Committee to begin Hussey replacement planning in the fall of 2020.**

*When it came time to plan for the new Cony High, the City and School Department created a joint committee to hold public meetings, examine the options, and come up with a recommendation. That is a good model to follow again. The Mayor and School Board Chair will meet in the spring and begin thinking through the process. The School Department will have money in the budget for a building consultant planner to staff the effort. The effort should not start until the new police station is approved, in order not to confuse the public. The effort should encompass not just the replacement of Hussey, but the broad vision for public schools in the future, including the locations for adult education and other special services.*

**Background to Capital Planning:** Beyond the need for a new police station, there are other capital items that can be predicted will need investments in the next ten years – such as Hussey School, the parking garage, fire stations, the Civic Center, City Hall, etc. While the City has a rolling 5-year capital improvements plan, some of these larger items are unpredictable in their timing and funding sources and are therefore not listed.

**Strategy 1C: Prepare a white paper outlining the larger capital needs that can be anticipated in the next ten years.** *The City Manager will bring the white paper to a Council workshop for discussion.*

**GOAL 2: Promote Pedestrian Safety, Walkability, and Public Transportation.**

**Background to Pedestrian Safety:** “You’re taking your lives in your hands.” So an Augusta citizen described walking around the city at a 2017 public hearing, a phrase that was echoed by several city councilors. The problem is urgent, as was illustrated in December of 2019 when a pedestrian was killed by a car while crossing Western Avenue. The Maine Department of Transportation is in the process of studying pedestrian safety in Augusta, and has money reserved to make improvements along state



routes within Augusta in the next three years. Also in 2019, Augusta citizens Kalie Hess and Kirsten Brewer formed a group called CAPITAL — Cyclists and Pedestrians Invigorating the Augusta Life! They are acting as a resource in providing information to the community, informing City Hall of citizen concerns, and working with state and local partners to make changes.

***Strategy 2A: Create an Ad Hoc Committee to promote Augusta as a “walkable/running/biking” city.*** This would be a City committee, appointed by the Mayor, but it would build upon the work already started by CAPITAL. Committee members would include current CAPITAL volunteers, but also add City Councilors, staff, and other key partners. The charge for the committee includes:

- Work with MDOT to implement pedestrian safety recommendations arising from its study
- Improve safety at Sewall and Western streets by creating a blinking crossing walk (like at Bridge and Water) and prohibiting right turn on red – and consider applying this approach to other busy crosswalks
- Create safe blinking crosswalks to Farrington School (across Eastern Avenue) and Lincoln School (across Western Avenue)
- Create sidewalk access from the Civic Center to the Marketplace at Augusta
- Move crosswalks away from rotaries
- Add a bike/walking lane on Calumet Bridge
- In the long term, add a pedestrian bridge to Kennebec Locke
- Discuss with MDOT their plans for the trestle over Water Street
- Educate pedestrians and bicyclists about road safety



***Background to public transportation:*** Young people – and retirees – want to live in a city where it isn’t necessary to drive a car to get everywhere. But in Augusta it is difficult to get a cab or Uber from the airport to a hotel, from a hotel to the Capitol building, from the Capitol building to downtown, from the neighborhoods to the hospital. There is very limited service for low-income and the elderly through the Kennebec Valley CAP. But this is far short of a system that is clear, predictable, and easy to use for the average person. The problem is that public transportation is expensive, and largely a federal and state responsibility, and beyond the ability of city government to address by itself. But the Council consensus is that this is an area that City government can get more involved in planning and advocacy.

***Strategy 2B: Meet with key partners to explore expanding transportation services, including:***

- Meet with taxi and Uber drivers to see what would make it easier for them to expand services
- Meet with KVCAP to discuss services for elderly and low income
- Inquire of state and federal government about their plans for passenger rail service in Augusta

### **GOAL 3: Promote Augusta as a Place to Live, Work, and Recreate.**

**Background to Marketing:** The need to promote Augusta as a good place to live and work has long been a Council goal. There is a particular need to market city living to millennials – to have a lifestyle, services (such as day care), housing, green environmental policies, recreation, schools and jobs that are attractive to millennials. In the past year, the Council created a committee that studied promotional options for improving its web site, its social media communications, its branding, and its use of the community television channel. The Committee submitted a report in November of 2019 recommending that the City hire a new full time communications manager responsible for all of these functions. They recommended that the position report directly to the City Manager. The Committee considered, and rejected, the options of sharing staff with the school department, or sharing a contractual position with other partners. Some Councilors are not sure that a full-time position can be afforded in this year's budget, but that some funding is needed this year.



**Strategy 3A:** Provide funding in the City budget preferably for a full-time in-house communications manager, but if this is not possible then at a part-time or consulting arrangement. The City Manager will include a full-time position in the draft City budget to be presented in the spring of 2020. Council members can debate at that point the best way to structure the position.

### **Goal 4: Stimulate Development in Sand Hill and Across the City.**

**Background to Sand Hill:** Sand Hill is today where Munjoy Hill in Portland was 40 years ago. Munjoy Hill went from a low-income, three-decker neighborhood, with a view of the water, to a desirable place to live for people of all backgrounds and incomes. Munjoy Hill's renaissance was helped by an active neighborhood organization; easy access to downtown through sidewalks and buses; an active City housing rehabilitation program; and selective public investments in a fire station, arts center, waterfront park, and walkable sidewalks. Sand Hill is now beginning to attract the interest of outside investors who see the potential of the neighborhood. This is the time to start thinking about the future. The place to start is Washington Street. Cleaning up shrubbery and opening visual access to the River, meeting with landlords to discuss rehabilitation incentives, considering how to improve access from the Hill to Mill Park, are all part of the picture.



**Strategy 4A:** Begin planning for the redevelopment of Sand Hill. The City planning and development staff will draft a white paper outlining opportunities for Sand Hill development and key investment needs and bring it to a Council workshop.



**B. Background to Tax Increment Financing (TIF) policy:** TIF investments are Augusta's major economic development tool. The current policy directing TIF investment was developed many years ago, before the downtown began to take off, before broadband was an everyday business tool, before shopping centers began to have economic challenges, before the riverfront was cleared. The policy needs to be updated to reflect current Augusta concerns and opportunities.



**Strategy 4B:** Update the City Tax Increment Financing Policy in 2020.

**C. Background to concerns with vacant and deteriorated buildings.** Augusta has done much in recent years to provide carrots (low-interest loans) and sticks (code enforcement penalties) to encourage owners of deteriorated and/or vacant buildings to invest and attract tenants. Even so, there remain key buildings in downtown, on Sand Hill, and in the West End, that are sitting empty or are underused. There is also a concern that there may be an influx of “sober houses” into the city’s residential neighborhoods that may not have proper building management standards.

**Strategy 4C:** The Planning and Development Department will research approaches used in other municipalities to incentivize the occupancy and rehabilitation of older buildings, and the management of sober houses.

**D. Background to marketing of industrial and commercial properties.** This is an ongoing and traditional role of economic development departments. However, technology in this area has changed, and the City needs to keep up.

**Strategy 4D:** The Planning and Development Department will develop an interactive online map of available properties. This will make it easier for economic development officials within and without the state to see what Augusta has to offer.

**E. Background to ownership of the Parking District:** Augusta’s arrangement in the downtown, where a private parking district manages a publicly funded garage and on-street parking, is fairly unique. Every so often it is useful to review the arrangement and consider whether changes are necessary.

**Strategy 4E:** The City Manager will prepare a white paper on the parking district, and recommend changes if necessary.

**F. Background to a Local Option Hotel Tax:** A local option hotel tax would provide property tax relief to service center communities like Augusta without affecting local residents, and based on experience around the country, would not appear to affect tourism or occupancy either. This is an idea before the

Legislature, and the City Council could explore the pros and cons of any legislation, and consider supporting it through the Mayor's Coalition.

**Strategy 4F: The Manager will place potential support for a local option hotel tax on a Council agenda for consideration and a vote.**

**G. Background to attracting a professional sports team to Augusta:** Augusta has a civic center, an accessible central Maine location, and a tradition of excellence in high school sports. It is a natural location for a minor league sports team of some sort.

**Strategy 4G: Continue efforts to identify and recruit a potential sports team to the city.**

**H. Background to using economic development partners:** Economic development takes place within a web of activity being undertaken by partners inside and outside of Augusta. The City should look for ways to engage and expand their partners' roles whenever possible.

**Strategy 4H: Expand the role of the Downtown Alliance in promoting events.**

**Strategy 4I: Hold a Council workshop to consider other ways to partner with neighboring communities in promoting the region.** In Waterville, for example, several cities partner together to form the Central Maine Growth Council. These and other models will be explored with regard to their applicability to Augusta in a Council workshop format.

## **GOAL 5: Plan to Enhance Augusta's Quality of Life**

**Background to Comprehensive Plan:** City staff and hundreds of residents have been working on an update of the 2007 Comprehensive Plan. A draft will be finished in early 2020, and will come to the Council for adoption in the spring.

**Strategy 5A: Adopt the 2020 Comprehensive Plan and Begin Implementation.** The City staff will present the draft plan to the Council in a workshop session, and hold public meetings in the early part of 2020. Following the revision and adoption of the plan, City staff will begin drafting ordinance revisions and other actions called for in the plan.



**Background to Parks and Recreation:** The Parks and Recreation Department continually becomes responsible for new properties in the City, but doesn't gain staff. In the words of one councilor, it is "property rich and events poor." Among the new and beautiful properties at Bicentennial Park, Howard Hill, and Bond Brook trails; now there is discussion of a new skating rink. The gateways to the city need landscaping. The Togus Pond Association will be needing help to maintain water quality. Work on a review began in 2019; now is the time take it through to completion.



**Strategy 5B: Prepare a Parks and Recreation Master Plan.** This year an Ad-Hoc Master Plan Committee will be formed and a consultant hired. The group will inventory current properties; examine options like a “park pass” and partnerships with volunteer groups for fundraising; survey the public about programming needs; and come up with a recommendation for the Department’s future.



**Background to Public Art:** This has long been a priority of the City Council. Augusta is a capital city, and public art is a feature of every capital in the country. The University of Maine at Augusta’s art program and Harlow Gallery can be important partners.

**Strategy 5C: City staff will draft an ordinance creating a Public Art Commission for discussion at a Council workshop.**

**D. Gateways to city:** This is also a perennial topic in the city of Augusta’s Council retreats in years past. Street lighting, banners, landscaping are important features for visitors to the city when they enter. A particular priority this year is signage: are the current signs consistent with the branding theme being developed for the city?

**Strategy 5D: City staff will review signs and report to the Council on any necessary changes.**

**E. Historic preservation:** The work of Augusta’s Historic Preservation Commission to identify historic neighborhoods and buildings in the city, and to create protections for their preservation, has created an incentive for people to invest in historic properties. Now the Commission is exploring the possibility of expanding the historic district to cover some areas on the east side of the River.

**Strategy 5E: Provide the resources necessary for the Historic Preservation Commission to inventory properties on the east side of the River..**

## **Goal 6: Enhance Citizen involvement and trust in government**

**Background to Volunteerism:** Augusta has a deep and committed group of volunteers that support its City committees, maintain its parks and recreation facilities, promotes the arts, raises funds for civic projects, provides help to those in need, etc. At the same time, it is sometimes difficult to recruit citizens to fill out City boards, or to maintain city playing fields. There are also shifting needs for volunteers; this year, Togus Pond volunteers will need help in monitoring and maintaining critical water quality in the lake. The availability of volunteers is not something the City should take for granted.



Strategy 6A: The City will inventory its current committee structure, and consider ways to streamline functions and recruit new blood. In addition, the new communications manager will be tasked with using social media to recruit volunteers.

**Background to Homelessness and Poverty:** 100 students in Augusta's public schools are homeless; over half of all students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Augusta volunteers, churches, and social groups do major work to help these children and their families.

Strategy 6B: Continue to support efforts to help homeless, immigrants and refugees, and children living in poverty.

**Background to Citizen complaints:** City councilors often hear from constituents that they have complained many times about something, but no one is listening. It is hard for a councilor to evaluate such claims. A complaint recording system, that tracks who complained about what and when, where the complaint went, and what the resolution is, would help councilors know what is going on, and would also help city policy makers to know priority areas for improvement. The other side of the coin is that this kind of system would cost money to create, monitor, train staff, report on, etc.

Strategy 6C: The City Manager will research how other cities handle this issue and report back at an informational meeting.