

## **Town Manager Report 2015-16**

Two years. Two years ago in December of 2014, a huge chapter in the history of Bucksport closed forever. The Verso Mill ceased paper production, taking with it decades of paper-making history, the livelihoods of hundreds of people, and forty percent of the Town's valuation. The event resulted in shock and anger and fear for the future.

For a community which had faced the inevitability of the mill closure and done its best to prepare for that day – the other shoe had dropped. Many are familiar with the trauma of the closure of the mill, and its sale to an entity that wished to tear it down. But like many tragedies, most know how bad things were – but far fewer people know 'the rest of the story' that is being written in the Town of Bucksport – and it is an important story. A funny thing happened as a result of this disaster... not a ha ha funny thing – but a strange and wonderful funny thing. Out of the shadow of the mill, the light began to shine on other aspects of the community. When change hits, a common response is caution. Faced with the unfamiliar, surrounded by the uncertain – the Town could have put the brakes on everything. Instead, the community picked itself up, dusted itself off – and is headed for the future.

In addition to the job retraining efforts put forth by the State, the community's elected and appointed leaders worked to gain early adjustment of the municipal valuation at the state level, resulting in increased aid to education and a lower local share to be paid from local taxation. The Town Council made a conscious decision to maintain public services through this crisis by utilizing 25% of the funds set aside for the consequences of mill closure over a number of years and stabilizing the mil rate.

And people stepped up. Residents became more engaged with not just their local government – but with their community as well. More businesses began to open on Main Street - filling empty storefronts. A new insurance agency, an art studio with retail and educational space, a new gift shop, a tapas restaurant and wine shop, a full service convenience store complex, expansion of businesses in the local business park, and more. The Heart & Soul program emerged and took up residence in a storefront on Main Street and is doing community outreach to all sectors of Bucksport to help define the path forward for the community based on what the people who live and work here want to see. RSU 25 continues to improve its curriculum and is a valued partner in the Town's community and economic development efforts. The local marina, purchased by the Town in 2013 is thriving, with seasonal space sold out before the beginning of the next boating year, and it is funded entirely through the fees paid by boaters and users of the facility. The waterfront is a major asset for the community and the Town is working to expand opportunities there.

And the stalwart group of businesses who were here before the mill closed – stayed. They weathered the storm and are seeing their business increase as the community moves forward. A group of them has formed the Main Street Group with an eye toward helping businesses locate and thrive in the downtown area, and Chamber of Commerce membership is growing.

And real estate began to sell. Local realtors indicate that they are busier than they have been in years. People are moving to Bucksport from other areas of Maine –and from out of state as well. People are drawn to the location – just 18 miles from the employment centers of Bangor/Brewer,

Ellsworth, or Belfast – for the beauty of the area, the good school system, good public services, reasonable property tax rate and available real estate at very reasonable prices.

The arts have emerged as a vital part of the community through the Bucksport Area Cultural Arts (BACAS) and the juried summer art festival that it sponsors, the Lighthouse Arts Studio and the dozens of artists that offer lessons and/or exhibit through the studio, the award-winning Wednesdays on Main program that brings live music, puppetry, films – and great food – to Main Street Bucksport every Wednesday during the summer. Northeast Historic Film sponsored an extremely well attended juried film festival in the fall of 2016 which drew many new people to the community and there are plans for such events to continue. 2017 is the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Town of Bucksport, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bucksport Bay Festival and the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the library. Plans are underway for a spectacular ‘combo’ event that incorporates all three milestones in the summer of 2017!

The community received designation as an AARP Age-Friendly Community in 2016 and works on an ongoing basis with the local Senior Resource Group of the Bucksport Bay Healthy Communities Coalition to improve accessibility to local buildings and facilities. Much progress has been made in this area resulting in repaired sidewalks, additional handicap accessible parking spaces, a grant program to assist businesses with accessibility improvements, changes in winter maintenance of sidewalks, and ongoing outreach to help those in the community with ability challenges.

The Town has received a broadband planning grant and is exploring options for increasing broadband internet access to the community as a means of attracting businesses and residents to our area and to improving opportunities for the businesses and residents who already call Bucksport home.

The company that purchased the VERSO mill is 90% completed with the phase 1 deconstruction of the site, with phase 2 to be completed by May of 2017. A Phase I Environmental Impact Assessment has been completed for the site. The company and the Town are working cooperatively to find new businesses for the former mill site. The community was part of the Federal EDAT team visit from a myriad of federal agencies and has identified needs such as brownfields remediation funds, EDA grant opportunities to assist business locations at the mill site, and broadband funding with which these agencies can assist. With power, the only rail access in Hancock County, and deep water as assets – this redevelopment site has the potential to bring a range of business and employment possibilities to this area.

And finally, the biggest things that Bucksport has going for it as it moves into the future are its momentum and community spirit. The positive energy of its residents and businesses and their willingness to work together for the future of the community is the foundation on which all of the community success is based.

Susan Lessard

Town Manager