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# Augusta ME: The New Bridge Begets a New Planned Neighborhood

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## Augusta ME: The New Bridge Begets a New Planned Neighborhood<sup>1</sup>



*A case from the library of “smart growth” leadership case studies prepared by the New England Environmental Finance Center, available at <http://efc.muskie.usm.maine.edu/pubs.htm>*

**ABSTRACT.** Construction of a new Third Bridge over the Kennebec River in Augusta offered the prospect of a new and handsome gateway to the city. Further, the resulting change in traffic patterns offered the City the chance to plan for a pattern of development quite different from what the city had experienced for the past half-century. The case study describes the planning and construction of the new bridge and corridors that re-routed traffic out of Augusta’s downtown and older neighborhoods, and created the opportunity for planned development adjacent to the corridor created by the new bridge. It goes on to describe the effort by the City to create the 1500-acre Riggs Brook Village zone nearby the new corridor, for mixed-use development with design standards

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Molly Pulsifer for the New England Environmental Finance Center’s “Next Communities Initiative,” Richard Barringer, ed., Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, Portland, Maine. August, 2006. The “Third Bridge”, looking east, photo courtesy MDOT. Copyright © 2006 by the Muskie School of Public Service.

embracing principles of New Urbanism. The strengths and shortcomings of these initiatives are addressed.

**AUGUSTA.** Augusta is in many ways the epicenter of Maine. Maine’s capitol city since 1827, it is the center of employment, commerce, and services for south-central Maine, and a regional transportation hub hosting state and county government agencies and many statewide non-profit organizations. It is a convenient location for meetings, conferences, and banquets, often at the Augusta Civic Center located directly off Interstate 95, the extension of the Maine Turnpike. It is home to 18,631 persons, a 0.4% increase since 2000 after several decades of decline.

Like many Maine communities, Augusta was heavily impacted by the loss of Maine manufacturing jobs in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its laid-off mill workers generally went unemployed or found service-sector employment not at the level of pay and benefits they had formerly enjoyed. In response, Augusta eagerly pursued most any economic development opportunity presented it, with the result of sprawling land use patterns and strip-development along all major access routes. Historically the community had been resistant to planning, zoning, or any regulatory action that might inhibit growth and its hoped-for economic gains.

In recent years Augusta has begun to consider and take ownership of its future growth patterns. In 2001 the Augusta Planning Board, after extensive research and public comment, reported that – to build a better future for the city, improve its image, and support continued economic development – it needed to grow beyond the governmental, retail, and medical service sectors then existing. Specifically, it cited incubation and growth of a technology sector, along with the physical landscape, architecture, recreational amenities, and housing that will attract the “knowledge workers” who would create it. The new Third Bridge over the Kennebec River and its attendant development provided an opportunity to plan and advance this new strategy.<sup>2</sup>

The Third Bridge connecting I-95 one mile north of the city center and Rte. 3 eastward to Penobscot Bay was completed in 2004. It is a \$35 million joint project of the Federal Highway Administration (FHA) and the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT), and the culmination of planning and political lobbying efforts that trace to the 1960’s.

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<sup>2</sup> City of Augusta, Augusta Northern Quadrant Zoning Study, Augusta ME, November 2001, p. 2

Together with the re-designation of a 3 mile section of Interstate 95 as Maine Turnpike, the bridge appears to have met its project goals, having caused no adverse impact on the economic vitality of Augusta's downtown, increased traffic safety, reduced traffic congestion, and brought the opportunity for planned development to portions of the transportation corridors adjacent to the new bridge. This included the opportunity to implement zoning for a new neighborhood at the junction of Church Hill Road and Route 3 that would come to be called Riggs Brook Village. This planning project is to many a symbol of Augusta regaining control of its development patterns and moving toward better, planned growth.

The long, arching new bridge over the beautiful Kennebec River creates a new gateway to the city, from which travelers and visitors will form their first impressions. The largely undeveloped area adjacent to the new bridge offered Augusta the opportunity to craft a new image for itself, one in contrast to its recent history of strip development and commercial sprawl. Aspects of the project, however, send a mixed message to travelers and local residents, alike, including the rezoning of portions of the intersecting north-south Route 201 corridor to permit commercial strip development; the first visual effects of that zoning, a new and large truck dealership at the eastern landing of the bridge; and the lack of interest to now in developing the newly zoned Riggs Brook Village.

**THE THIRD BRIDGE.** Augustans began to feel the need for a new, third bridge over the Kennebec as early as the 1960s when two bridges existed, the Memorial and the Father Curran. Traffic counts demonstrated the need for a new bridge to relieve traffic congestion within the city and as far away as portions of coastal Route 1, some 30 miles down river. The two bridges were at maximum capacity due to their use as a highway by-pass for large, northbound trucks over the 80,000-pound interstate weight limit that, by federal law, were forced off the Maine Turnpike and re-routed through the center of Augusta on their journey northeast-ward. As a result, the traffic circles at either end of the Memorial Bridge became the two highest traffic accident sites in the state.

When traffic from the Interstate backed up along Western Avenue, as it often did, it diverted into local residential neighborhoods. The huge volume of traffic, most of it using the avenue as a thoroughfare to destinations other than Augusta, including Acadia National Park, brought with it unplanned, linear strip-development. The resulting impacts on safety, noise, air pollution, and aesthetics were enough to prompt lobbying for a new bridge to divert non-local traffic.



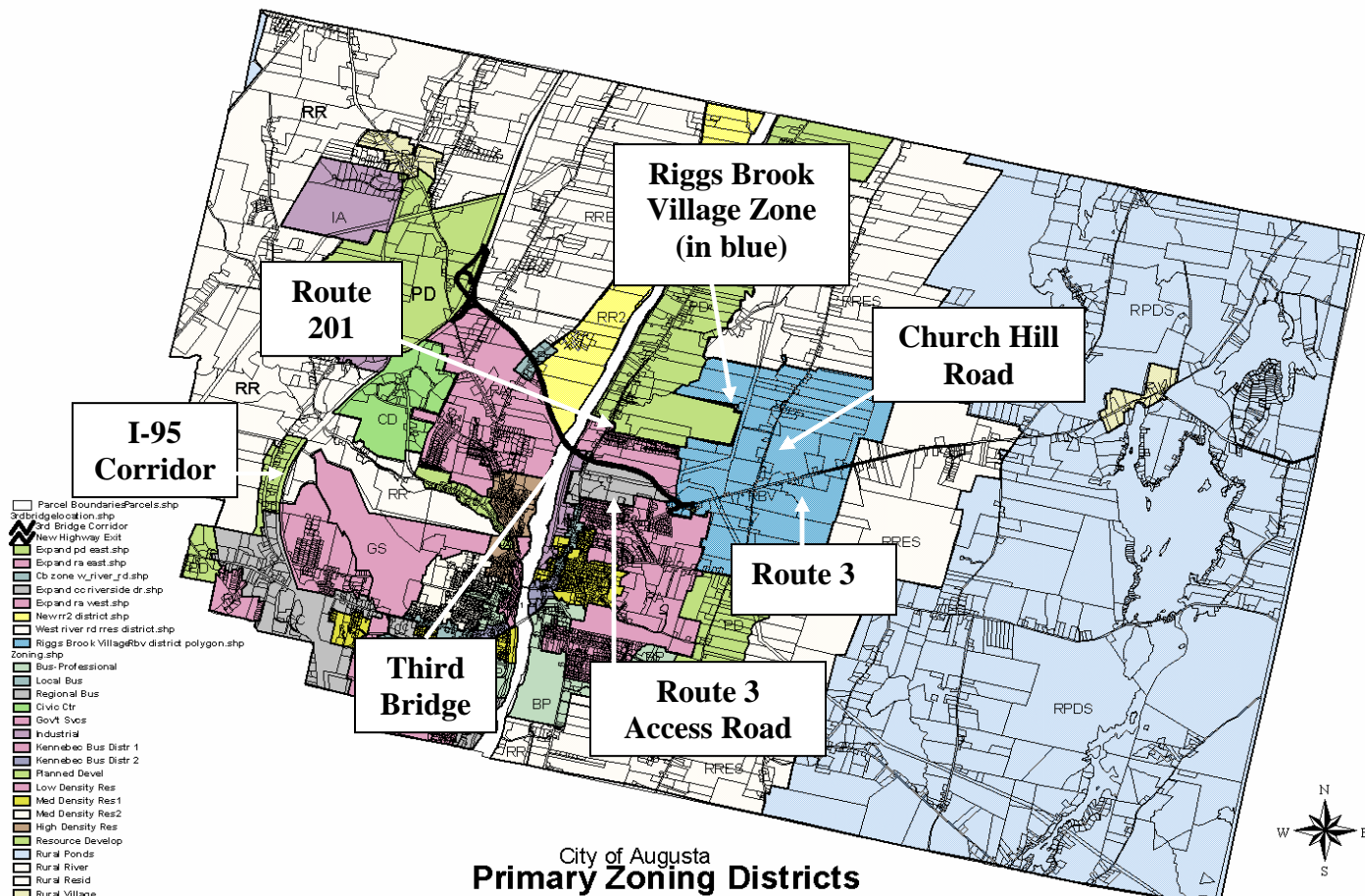
**Traffic waiting at a light along Western Avenue**

Funding for a new bridge, however, was not readily available, and hinged on federal help and an increase in the state gasoline tax. In addition to the construction of the Third Bridge itself, it was necessary to petition the FHA and the Maine Turnpike Authority to allow a three-mile section of Interstate 95 to be re-designated as an extension of the Maine Turnpike. In this scenario, heavy truck traffic would be able to bypass Augusta's city center and access the new river crossing.

Finally, the Third Bridge project necessitated a limited access road from Interstate 95 west of the river to U.S. Route 3 at a rural place east of Augusta. The access road would intersect Route 201 on the east side of the river and continue overland to join Route 3. Thirty land parcels would have to be acquired to construct the access road.

In the late 1990's, intensive lobbying by Augusta City Officials and state legislators, MDOT, and the Maine congressional delegation secured an increase in the state gasoline tax, designating sufficient funds for Augusta's new bridge project, as well as approval of the necessary federal funding.





**Augusta 2002 revised zoning map, showing location of the new Third Bridge, the access road to Rte. 3, and Riggs Brook Village zone**

**FEDERAL/STATE PUBLIC PROCESS.** Prior to its approval of the Third Bridge, the FHA required MDOT to develop a site option that was appropriate from an engineering standpoint, met National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) standards, and enjoyed support from the local community. To guide their efforts, the City and MDOT formed a Citizen Advisory Committee that included City Councilors, the Mayor, the City Manager, and local business owners and residents, and was chaired by Dick O'Connor, a long-time resident of Augusta, influential local business owner and active member of the Augusta Board of Trade.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Augusta Board of Trade is a 40-year old nonprofit organization, the brainchild of former and longtime City Manager Paul Poulin, devoted to the business and economic development of the City of Augusta; Bill Bridgeo, the current City Manager is a member ex officio. The Board

The Citizen Advisory Committee met monthly from March 1997 until development of the final NEPA environmental impact statement for the Third Bridge in 2000. Between 1997 and 1999 MDOT hosted seven public meetings, a series of neighborhood meetings, and a final public hearing that were attended by approximately five hundred and fifty community members. MDOT staff put the City seal on public notices and always had City, rather than its own officials open and close the public meetings.

Augusta, it needs be noted, has a very different cultural dynamic on the east and west sides of the Kennebec River. Historical settlement and development patterns of manufacturing and commerce on the west, and predominantly residential and agricultural development on the east are the source of a political dichotomy that persists to this day; and made it imperative for MDOT to host meetings and seek input from the two sides separately.

In the course of these meetings, the Citizen Advisory Committee was able to narrow the site decision to two scenarios that ultimately went to public hearing. Committee members and numerous community officials, including the City Manager and City Planner, attended the final public hearing, and all stood at its opening to declare their support for the bridge project.

In public hearings MDOT traditionally adopts a “concurrence model,” rather than the more commonly known “consensus-model”. Here, MDOT explains each final option, its costs and benefits, and asks the community members if they concur and, if not, why not. Since the FHA requires MDOT to address only substantive concerns from the citizenry, this model puts them in a position to respond effectively, with analysis. MDOT submitted the preferred public alternative to the FHA, which issued a formal record of decision in January 2001 approving the Third Bridge project.

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views itself as “able to accomplish for the city what the City, itself, cannot to foment economic growth.” It is a significant force in Augusta politics on all important economic development matters. While the City is not legally required to have the Board sign-off on any project prior to its approval, the Board’s strong political presence makes it a key player and interest group to which the City pays careful attention.



**RIGGS BROOK VILLAGE EMERGES.** With the new bridge, truck bypass, and 3-mile access road approved for completion in 2004, City officials – including the Mayor, the City Manager, and the Directors of Economic Development and Planning – recognized that the land adjacent to the bridge landings would experience dramatically different use, access, and traffic impacts from the past; and, in the words of City Manager Bill Bridgeo, that “the Third Bridge would offer an unprecedented opportunity to shape the future land use patterns of the city.”

The City Planning Board anticipated these changes in 2001 when it commissioned its Northern Quadrant Zoning Study and recommended a special zoning district to be known as Riggs Brook Village. The resulting Riggs Brook Village District zone would differ from anything seen previously in Augusta, designated “high density and mixed-use,” with the specific goal of developing the area into a model, planned neighborhood to support future residential, commercial, retail, and the hoped-for technology sector growth. Divided into several sub-zones, the Riggs Brook Village Zone envisioned a variety of land uses, infrastructure requirements, design standards, and open space amenities.

The name Riggs Brook Village was chosen, according to the Planning Office, to reflect the natural character of the village, one with a unique identity, in harmony with the environment, and at a human scale. Mike Duguay, Director of the City’s Office of Economic Development (OED),



**The Junction of Church Hill Road and Route 3, site of the new Riggs Brook Village Zone, looking north.**

describes the vision of “an entire new section of town with commercial, professional, and residential neighbors coexisting in harmony in a pleasant setting.”

It was a priority both to the City and MDOT that the new access road, Route 3, and the Riggs Brook area did not develop in the same way that Western Avenue, at the city's center, had for the preceding 40 years. Western Avenue, once a choice and elm-lined residential, professional, and light commercial thoroughfare, had succumbed to commercial strip-development with the coming of the Maine Turnpike to Augusta in the late 1950s, and its emptying onto this handsome street. As commercial access driveways and needed traffic signals were added, traffic slowed and the avenue's (and the city's) aesthetic appeal declined. Augusta acquired the image of a tawdry transportation corridor rather than a riverside New England capitol city and residential/commerce center worth taking pride in and visiting.

**THE CITY'S PUBLIC PROCESS:** As MDOT's public participation process for approval of the Third Bridge came to a close, the City Planning Board partnered with the OED and began a grassroots, public consensus-building process of its own. City officials envisioned that Riggs Brook Village would, if successful, provide Augusta with growth opportunities for the next fifty years. In a sense, the City hoped landowners would support an effort to "raise the bar" for land use, where they could create an appealing environment through planning and flexible zoning, and assure a quality of development that would in turn attract high-quality investment to the area.

City staff initiated meetings with landowners along the new transportation corridor and at the intersection of the new access road and Church Hill Road. The meetings were small at first, just two- to four-person discussions. City staff worked to sell the idea that careful planning could promote attractive layout and design, prevent inappropriate development, and protect the property values of current landowners. They explained how these efforts might attract new businesses to this part of Augusta, because it would be viewed as attractive, valuable property.

City Manager Bridgeo observes that the active involvement of City Councilor Karen Foster was indispensable to the success of the outreach effort. Foster, a long time resident of the proposed Riggs Brook Village Zone, has a farm along Church Hill Road and is a respected member of the community and Augusta as a whole. Her role as a

liaison between the Riggs Brook community and the City of Augusta was critical in facilitating dialogue with neighborhood residents.

In addition to landowner outreach, some 25 public meetings of various types were held over a period of eighteen months, in three stages. First, the City focused on the larger concepts to gain initial assent of the citizenry. Second, they addressed zoning concerns, such as what uses might be appropriate for which blocks of land. Finally, they delved into details of access and design.

As this process progressed, the OED, Planning Board, and Planning Office staff decided to integrate the existing topography of the area into its long-term development. The area on the east side of the new bridge is shaped as a basin, and they envisioned the ridgelines being designated as residential areas, with an inner ring of retail and a middle ring oriented toward commercial development and office parks. They envisioned an environmentally appropriate, mixed-use development pattern that would economically benefit the entire city.

Along with mixed-use development, the Planning Office hoped to rally support for stricter design standards that would bring new structures to a more aesthetically appealing, human scale without changing their utility. Through effective design, they argued, you could make development look and feel very different at no or little extra cost.

Predictably, these arguments were not universally well-received. From the outset there were factional interests, all of whom used all of the political tools available to them to exert influence on the outcome. The four main factions were the Augusta Board of Trade, the Augusta Chamber of Commerce, the affected large landowners, and citizens opposed to development in general. Large landowners voiced grave concerns over potential devaluation of their land. They were an active presence at public meetings, and worked as well through their City Councilors and letters to the local newspaper, the Kennebec Journal.

Landowners who had been holding commercially-zoned property along the new access road were outraged at MDOT for banning, for reasons of traffic flow and safety, driveway access to the new access road. The proposed density, size, and design

standards within the Riggs Brook Village Zone concerned landowners who felt that developers would choose to build elsewhere, where regulations are less stringent.

The Augusta Board of Trade and the Chamber of Commerce were concerned that the City's vision would inhibit growth. For example, in their efforts to promote strategic development of the area, the City had not indicated *when* they would extend sewer and water lines to and throughout the new Village District. The Board of Trade felt and continues to feel that only when sewer and water become available will there be sufficient incentive for development of Riggs Village. They also worried that required vegetative buffers, building size limitations, and mandates for rear parking and entrances would suppress demand for the properties.

To extend its influence over decisions in the area, the Board of Trade purchased approximately fifty acres of commercial property in the southwest corner of the Riggs Brook Village Zone. Dick O'Connor, active Board of Trade member and chair of the Citizen Advisory Board for the Third Bridge purchased land at the eastern landing of the bridge, at the intersection of Route 201 and Route 3.

Upon completion of the bridge, O'Connor Motors developed the land into a truck lot for its successful GMC dealership. By constructing the lot entrance along Route 201, O'Connor Motors avoided having to petition for an entrance along the new access road restricted by MDOT. This development is the first along the



**O'Connor GMC's truck lot at the eastern landing of the new Third Bridge.**

newly commercially-zoned portion of Route 201, immediately adjacent to the eastern landing of the bridge, permitting development of gas stations, retail chains, and the fast food restaurants commonly associated with strip-development.

MDOT’s refusal to compromise on the issue of curb cuts along the access road preserves much of the corridor’s outstanding natural character, save for the City’s commercial zoning at the intersection with Route 201. The public outreach process allowed City leaders to convey that the purpose of the new access corridor was not to create another strip for unbridled development, but to allow traffic to flow freely from the new bridge to planned development that would benefit the community as a whole.

While the issues were contentious and the planning concepts radical, the City managed to gain approval for rezoning 1,500 acres of Riggs Brook Village for “mixed-use, planned development.” In Michael Duguay’s opinion, the effort was successful because, though the City, itself, planted many ideas and smart growth design concepts into the public participation process, the citizenry took ownership of these ideas and decided on their own terms how the new development should look.

**The Current Situation.** In December 2001, when the Riggs Brook Village District project was presented to the City Council, it was supported by a majority of concerned public and passed; at the same time the Council extended commercial zoning of private properties along Route 201 to the intersection with the access road.

It is unclear at this time, five years later, whether the new mixed-use village zone will fulfill its promise of fifty years of smart-growth development for Augusta. There is interest from developers in building over two hundred new housing units in Augusta, some of which has focused on Riggs Brook Village. The City has yet to supply municipal sewer and water to the area, however. “Augusta has among the highest (property tax) mil-rates



**The parcel rezoned for commercial mixed-use, a home sits vacant at the intersection of Route 3 and Church Hill Road in Riggs Brook Village.**



in the state,” reports City Manager Bill Bridgeo, “and the idea of putting \$5 million there with no development is just not do-able now . . . and other projects and priorities keep coming along.”

Bridgeo is ex officio board member of the Augusta Water & Sanitary District that, in summer 2006, is installing a new sewer line along Route 201 north of the intersection with the access road, about a mile. He hopes to see this line, which has sufficient capacity, “extended cross-country” to the Riggs Brook Village area “in about 3 to 4 years, when water can be brought into the site from an existing line out Route 3.” Meanwhile, he reports, the Zoning Board of Appeals “has already lessened some of the zoning provisions for Riggs Brook Village at the request of local landowners.”

## TEACHING NOTES:

Important ideas illustrated in the Augusta case include:

1. Be prepared when a window of opportunity opens for new ways of doing things. The new bridge presented an opportunity for the City to plan for growth. If they chose not to, the area would certainly have sprawled in the same way as Western Avenue.
  - have a shared vision and a plan to seize the opportunity.
2. Know how to facilitate bargaining and negotiation. The City of Augusta went into the public process with landowners with a vision and a strategy to earn their support.
  - seek mutual gains
  - be creative, think “out of the box”
3. Develop transparency, trust, and confidence in the process. Both the Maine DOT and the City, in their consensus building efforts, used specific strategies to overcome fear and earn citizen trust.
4. Even if you deposit certain ideas into the planning and design process, allow enough time and discourse for citizens to understand and re-work them, and to take ownership of the planning process.
5. Public leadership matters, as in the cases of the city’s Planning Office and Councilor Karen Foster, as well as the MDOT.
6. Incremental change, if it is additive, can lead over time to substantial change.
7. Implementation matters. Good analysis and public process are not enough to get good follow-through. What ever happened to the needed infrastructure? Was there a plan in place to move it forward?
8. Ethics matter. What are the ethical issues involved with a prominent member of the business community benefiting directly from decisions proceeding from a public process he chaired? Do you believe this was proper? Does this say anything about the civic character of this community?