



## GROWING UP

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

*“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”*

GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA

**A**fter I graduated from high school and before I left for college, I took a summer job at Allen’s Pharmacy in Bridgton. It was located in the March Block on Main where Bridgton Books is now. Eventually LaVerdiere’s, which became Rite Aid, which became Walgreens, took its place elsewhere in town, but in the meantime, Allen’s Pharmacy, with its out-of-square angles and creaky floors, was where you went if you needed a prescription, box of bandaids, greeting card, or alarm clock. The owner, Leonard Harvie, stocked a little bit of everything.

My memories of that summer are poignant, no doubt because it was on the eve of my leaving, but I think a lot of it was down to Bridgton itself. It was at that time both imperfect and comfortable, kind of like an old shoe. Adams Bakery was on one end of town and Allen’s was an easy walk away. Main Street, Bridgton, was about as Main Street as it gets and yet it was uniquely its own. A lot of what made it so was the fact that almost every business in town was independently owned and operated. While franchises and chain stores may have infiltrated other towns in America, Bridgton had remained fairly local. Technically, Allen’s Pharmacy was a Rexall drug store, but the difference is that Len was in the store most every day.

If you look at a photo of Main Street, Bridgton, from 1980 and compare it with Bridgton now, you would see many of the same buildings. Either by the grace of God or economic stagnation, Bridgton has managed to avoid the franchise fate of nearby towns like Windham and North Conway, New Hampshire. Neither has it lost its inherent character to gentrification, for as Abraham Schechter wisely posited in a recent article on Portland, Maine, “How do you un-gentrify a city? I don’t think it can be done.”

The pandemic provided an opportunity to better see what is functional and what is not with so many things. As was the case in most towns and cities, small businesses were hardest hit, and Bridgton is made up almost entirely of small businesses, most of which are in the service sector.

At what we hope is nearly the end of the pandemic, Bridgton stands at a vertical crossroad; it can either go up or down. The

former can be achieved through thoughtful and progressive zoning regulations that bring economic growth and vitality to the community, while preserving and protecting the innate character of the town. With no plan in place, the latter is a distinct possibility.

**I**n November of 2019, just a few months before the pandemic hit, Bridgton hired a new Community Development Director. Linda LaCroix, who holds a bachelor’s degree from the University of Vermont, a master’s in business from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, a master’s in environmental law and policy from Vermont Law School, and a Ph.D. in philosophy and mathematics from M.I.T., was at a crossroads moment in her life when she saw the position advertised and immediately applied for it. She fell in love with Bridgton during childhood summers spent with her family at the former Stone’s Camps on Highland Lake. The education and experience she’s gained since then allows her to be of service to a town she holds dear. Central to her contribution is the town’s comprehensive plan, which is currently being amended and updated for the next ten years. Part of her process is recognizing where the gaps are and filling them.



Workforce development, broadband, and mental health services are among those gaps. Zoning is another big issue. Bridgton adopted a new land use plan in 2019 and did a major consolidation of all land use-related ordinances that got rid of contradictions and duplications, but it’s an ongoing process. With so many community development components to consider, it’s essential to have an all-encompassing paradigm to guide your process.

“My three pillars are sustainability, resilience, and equity. Equity being the kingpin because if you have a sustainable trajectory and then you create the capacity for a resilient response to all these interruptions that happen to you, like COVID, then equity can be achieved. And we really need equity here,” says LaCroix.

Infrastructure, services, and community engagement all require multi-dimensional analysis. LaCroix feels strongly that infrastructure should be looked at as the foundational level of what supports a community, but what she’s really after—community well being—is at the top. She sees the restructuring of the comprehensive plan as a good opportunity to define things that really weren’t well defined before, like the character of Bridgton. She also sees opportunity where others might see stagnation or even degradation and eschews the tendency to define things as either negative or positive—because things are not always what they seem. For example, we think of debt as a negative, but when it comes to economic development, it’s actually a positive impact; you have to spend money to make money. Consequently, she prefers to view things through the lens of whether or not they are an impact that creatively supports community well being, which is defined by equity.

“If you’re looking at things in a silo, then you’ll miss those opportunities. This is a decision-making process and we need to get to the point where the character of Bridgton is defined in such a way that you can make a decision based on [that definition]. It’s not something that gives you the opportunity to say, ‘does this support or not support the character of Bridgton?’ because there’s no decision-making tool to define what that is.”

Community engagement is the vehicle through which LaCroix believes that definition can be found. The plan she supports will actively engage citizens—along with the support of town officials—to have a say in their town’s future. She shares an observation made by a colleague: If you do all the groundwork, the decision is obvious. And if the decision isn’t obvious, you haven’t done enough groundwork.

The comprehensive plan is critical to the community development process because it addresses future land use. According to LaCroix, land use should be a light touch; should follow the organic growth of the town; and in this stage of climate change should create connectivity. The \$30 million wastewater and streetscape project, funded by grants and loans from USDA Rural Development Department of Environmental Protection and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), gives Bridgton a distinct advantage. As a result of the Streetscape projects, newly upgraded sidewalks all the way from Kansas Road to Highland Beach create walkability. Concurrently, the wastewater project to upgrade the town’s thirty-year-old sewer system is being completed. LaCroix also points to Jumpstart Bridgton Business, a program planned for small business owners that when enacted will allow them to improve their businesses with the incentive of grants and no-interest or low-interest loans. She cites Depot Street as a great example of what can happen when public and private funds are invested in community. The Community Development Committee has also formed a Conservancy Research Group (CRG) that is exploring the possibility of morphing the Pondicherry Stewardship program into a town-wide conservation commission. A youth leadership and intern program will assist in the research process.

When asked what is the key driver in Bridgton’s upward growth, LaCroix allows that she can give me the one everyone likes to hear: more services.

“Or I can give you the one that I believe is key. When you uplift the disadvantaged through opportunities for jobs, opportunities for health care, opportunities for affordable living, everybody gets rich! When you ignore that, nobody goes anywhere. That’s just the plain truth of it. Do you focus only on that? No.

There are so many aspects and everybody wants their particular aspect done now, but that’s not how it’s done. Coming together and being supportive of each other—business-wise, personally—we’ll always have different political views, but we all love this town and that’s what we can surround ourselves with.

I think what you’re seeing here in Bridgton has a lot to do with the recent infrastructure improvements that have attracted new businesses and residents alike. We have this opportunity to make a lot of hay out of this gorgeous thing that just happened to us. And I think there is a tenor and a tone on the part of the majority of people in this town to do just that—including the leadership.”

LaCroix is invested in Bridgton on a personal level as well. Last year she bought the green and yellow buildings on Main Street from Judith Evergreen. Asked what she plans to do with them, her answer is “very little.” The colors will stay the same and the only plan she

has is for a fine art gallery on the main level of the green building. Sometimes it’s simply a matter of knowing what needs to change and what should stay the same.

**M**ick Early, a realtor with The Lakes Real Estate in Bridgton, formerly ReMax At the Lakes, sees a lot of positive change taking place in Bridgton.

“When I first started getting to know Bridgton in 2001, it struck me as an interesting but somewhat sleepy, older mill town,” says Early, who grew up in Dublin, Ireland. “The old Magic Lantern was still there, Renys had yet to be expanded and there wasn’t much going on



on Depot Street. By the time I decided to practice real estate here, I could tell that things were changing for the better in Bridgton. Hannaford had opened, the Magic Lantern was rebuilt, and several new retail and dining options were creating a buzz. Through both my personal and professional perspective, I could sense that the demographic was also changing. People were seeing it as an attractive year-round—rather than vacation-only—destination.”

Now, despite two years of economic challenge from the pandemic, Early senses that the atmosphere of Bridgton is changing still; that there’s a new confidence driven by eagerness to invest in an established-but-evolving community. The recent purchase of Shawnee Peak is a great example of that.

Early points to the revitalization of Depot Street as another example of investor confidence that has seriously changed how people view downtown Bridgton. The Streetscape project has improved the physical look of the town and the upgraded wastewater system has made it possible for businesses to both open and expand. Dining options have vastly improved, with everything from sushi to wood-fired pizza to gastropub offerings. Events like Ladies’ Weekend Out and Art in the Park have brought attention to Bridgton as a shopping destination. The Bridgton Farmers’ Market and recent addition of Music on Main feed the community in more ways than one.

While growth is usually a good thing, Early cautions that it can be a double-edged sword. “In order to maintain the rural character of Bridgton, we have to make sure its charm isn’t lost to big box stores and franchise outlets. If Bridgton allows itself to become North Conway or Windham, it will no longer be viewed as such an attractive option.”

While the pandemic has definitely challenged many businesses in the service sector, it has ironically created a real estate boom. Deemed an essential service by the state, the real estate industry not only continued to operate with some restrictions in place throughout the pandemic, but experienced an almost unprecedented uptick. People from metropolitan areas who knew Maine as a vacation area suddenly saw it as a place to live permanently. The shift to working remotely has had a lot to do with this.

This last point addresses one of the gaps that Bridgton needs to fill if it wants to continue to grow, and it’s one to which Early often has to answer.

“One of the first questions potential homebuyers invariably ask me is, ‘How is the Internet service?’ I tell them quite honestly that in certain areas it’s less than adequate but that it is getting better. If Bridgton is to develop economically, we need reliable internet service. We need broadband.”

**A**nother person who has a serious stake in Bridgton's future is Justin McIver, owner of Main Eco Homes. McIver's early stamp on Bridgton was made with four commercial buildings in the downtown area and the clubhouse at Bridgton Highlands Country Club. He has since completed two office suites on Portland Road near the junction of Sandy Creek and is beginning another ambitious project at the junction of Routes 302 and 117 on a lot that was formerly home to Macdonald Motors. He recently received full legal approval for the construction of an in-town hotel on the Saunders Mill site and two adjacent parcels at the corner of Bacon and Kennard Streets.



On the residential front, McIver has been the developer for the Cottages at Willett Brook located off South High, Lakewood Apartments located off Portland Road on Lakewood Drive, and many custom homes in the area.

Whether or not you agree with McIver's impact on Bridgton, there is no question of his investment in the town's future. I say "whether or not" because there has been a lot of pushback to the hotel he finally got approval to build. A number of people feel the 66-room hotel is not in keeping with the character of Bridgton and that the impact on the Kennard Street neighborhood and nearby Highland Beach and ecologically-sensitive surroundings will be detrimental. After a prolonged, two-year process that concluded in Maine Supreme Court, McIver was granted full approval for the project in January of this year.

McIver is quick to assert that he's not in the hotel business, but that as a builder and member of the Bridgton Economic Development and Community Development Committees, he was constantly being asked when he was going to build one. From his interest in Bridgton's history he knew there were at one time three hotels in town, including the four-story Cumberland Hotel, which stood on the corner of Main Street and Bacon, a stone's throw away from the Saunders Mill site. He feels that current-day Bridgton is missing out by not having more ways to keep people from just passing through; that an in-town hotel is central to its growth. He points out that it's a loss for the local economy that nearby wedding venues have had to bus their overflow guests to accommodations in North Conway.

"We're in a tourist community and we don't even have an upscale hotel that leaves a really good impression on our guests and serves as an educational gateway to the town's history. That was the vision for this project," says McIver.

Ironically, McIver is very grateful for the opposing voices for a couple of reasons. He credits them with raising objections that have resulted in revised and even scaled-back plans for the hotel. In the end, he feels their input has contributed to an infinitely better project. He also points out that if the project had gone uncontested, the hotel would have opened on the eve of the pandemic, which would not have been good for him or the town.

"I am so glad there was opposition or at least people of concern. Hopefully eventually they'll understand the vision, but not everybody will and that's OK. I learned through that process. It would never have been the project that it is today if I didn't go through it. [The hotel] is much better than when I first started planning it. Design-wise, the fit—it took it to another level of fitting better in the area," says McIver.

After listening and learning during the two years of contention,

he removed the convention center, downsized the hotel and changed its aesthetic. He purposely did not include a restaurant that would take business away from other restaurants in town. He worked with the Bridgton Historical Society. And he consulted with Christopher Closs, Preservation Services Advisor at Maine Preservation, who assured him that the hotel was exactly what and where it should be; that replacing a derelict industrial site from a bygone era with a hospitality venue for today's tourism economy squarely downtown would put it within walking distance to shops and restaurants—something that locating it out of town along Route 302 would not.

"I don't picture myself as a developer necessarily. I picture myself as a leader in the community trying to improve and sustain the region. I'm going all in because I believe so much in the people here and the community and I think we have something special here. But we have to be able to create opportunities and be able to move forward."

Paying his twenty-two employees three hours each to clean up Bridgton on Earth Day and spearheading "Music on Main" with his wife, Bernadette McIver, is further testament to his commitment to community.

"I could never do anything I do without great people around me, especially my wife."

McIver's latest project, The Gateway, at the junction of 302 and 117 is a brewpub/restaurant that will offer rooftop hospitality overlooking Stevens Brook. He contends that the brook has been unfairly obscured and ignored by the many vacant buildings that stand between it and the road, and this project will pay it some overdue attention. More importantly, it's an opportunity to revitalize what was once a vibrant gateway to the downtown.

"For the history of Bridgton you have to go back to see what it really was. It's not what it's been the past thirty to forty years. That's not the true Bridgton. It was way more abundant and vibrant back in the day," says McIver.

Just as the passenger rail redeemed Bridgton in 1883, McIver believes it can be redeemed today.

"It's all about elevating the community. The way you change the world is town by town."

After talking with LaCroix, Early, and McIver, I'm optimistic about Bridgton's future. It seems eminently possible to make creative, and even necessary, changes that improve the town without sacrificing its inherent character. Through a reciprocal exchange between residents, business owners, realtors, developers, town planners and officials, there is the possibility to keep what is uniquely and essentially Bridgton, while letting go of that which no longer serves it. To love Bridgton, *always*, and even more. ✨

