

Maine Town & City

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Meet Linda Johns, the City of Brewer's official planner

Her love of the outdoors and all things Maine led Johns to a career that she never regrets, even when she's taking 'random' photos of bus stops and public gardens.

By **Stephanie Bouchard**

Linda Johns, the City of Brewer's planning director, is a Jersey Girl, *but* – she's quick to point out – not the kind of wild Jersey Girl portrayed on today's television shows. She and her family moved from central New Jersey to the northern part of the state where she grew up on a small lake at the foot of the Kittatinny Mountain and the Appalachian Trail.

Much like those of many Mainers, her childhood days in New Jersey were spent playing and hiking outside, taking care of rescue animals (including horses), tending a huge vegetable garden and walking around the lake to visit her grandparents. Her childhood experiences shaped her love of nature and being outdoors and put her on track – albeit a circuitous one – to a career in local government.

Here's how she got there.

Q. Tell us how you got to Maine and a little about yourself.

A. As I neared my senior year of high school, my father saw the handwriting on the wall in that the company he worked at for almost 25 years was close to letting him go. A friend of his had recently purchased a Baskin-Robbins ice cream store franchise and suggested to my parents that they might be interested (in one of the franchises). We got a list of company-owned stores that were for sale, then set out to visit all the northeast locations to see if any were the right fit.

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Linda Johns

The last store on our tour was the Baskin-Robbins in the Bangor Mall. Never having been to Maine before, we arrived late in the evening and made it over to the mall just before closing. After a quick look, we spent the night at a local motel and went back the next morning for a closer look. I don't recall who said what,

but all of us just knew – this was going to be home.

My life now includes two "hometowns." There is my "adopted" home – the City of Brewer – where I spend much of my time with my work family. Then there is also the small town of Clifton, where I reside.

I live on Chemo Pond with Chick Hill nearby and my parents living down the road. My two daughters were fortunate to have had a childhood similar to mine and they, too, thoroughly enjoy the outdoors.

You can most often find me outdoors on the lake, hiking or taking wildlife photographs. While being on the top of Mount Katahdin and sitting beside the ocean are special to me, I also enjoy the little things, like listening to the loons and watching the sunset.

Q. How did you end up as a city planner?

A. I moved to Maine my freshman year of college and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Forest Management from the University of

HOMETOWN CAREERS

City of Brewer Planning Director Linda Johns appears in Maine Municipal Association's Hometown Careers campaign, along with many other city and town officials. To learn more about Hometown Careers, go to: <https://www.mainehometowncareers.org/>

Maine at Orono. As a newly licensed Maine forester, I planned to work on creating a new genetic variety of tree that would grow fast and have fiber superior for Maine's manufacturing. Unfortunately, International Paper closed their forestry greenhouses months before my graduation and we all know what happened with the mills in Maine.

As part of my studies at UMO, I was required to take land surveying courses. I accepted a job with a land surveying company in Limerick and got my state land surveyor license. Wanting to move back to central Maine, I accepted a position with a survey company in Bangor, where I worked for 13 years not only performing all aspects of surveying but also consulting and preparing land use plans and applications.

A medical emergency left Brewer without a city planner. I was asked to fill in. As a land surveyor, I spent many years designing and bringing site plans and subdivision plans and presenting those to area Planning Boards for approvals so I was very familiar with land use and the Planning Board process. I worked both jobs for five months before moving into the city planner position full time in 2001. I work with great people and (most days!) enjoy going to work.

Q. What do you do as the Planning Director for Brewer?

A. The entire planning department consists of one full-time and one-part time position, so I do a little of everything. Planners in Maine often wear several hats, especially municipal planners in smaller communities. In a single day, I can work on transportation issues, the construction of a new building or use, ideas for a new open space, writing ordinance amendments, and meet with a landowner to answer questions. I can say it's never boring.

My position also oversees the Planning Board and the Conservation Commission – two great groups of residents who volunteer their time to the community. The Planning Board holds public hearings and reviews many development projects. In order to make their work easier, the Planning Department does much of the legwork leading up to their meetings. A planner doesn't need to know everything but does need to know where to get the right information. I work closely with the City Engineer and the Code Enforcement, Economic Development, Environmental, Water, and

Public Safety departments to review each site plan or subdivision application and then work with the applicant on any changes.

Long-range planning is also an important aspect of my job. Planning for the future can be exciting! Brewer completed its latest Comprehensive Plan in 2015 after a two-year process of committee and public meetings. A comp plan is the vision of the municipality and the basis of future town decisions.

The most rewarding aspect of my work is helping landowners, developers, groups and organizations design and implement the best product which meets both their needs and the city's, and benefits all. I am also fortunate to consult with local law firms and be involved with many regional organizations such as Bangor Area Comprehensive Transportation System (BACTS), Lower Penobscot Watershed Coalition, Heart of the Penobscot, Fields Pond Audubon, Maine Coast Heritage Trust and other local



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Q. When you're not working, and you're in other communities for business or pleasure, are you able to turn off the city planner role in your head or do you always look around at other communities with the eye of a town planner, trying to get ideas or noticing things that aren't working?

A. My family has often commented on my not being able to "turn off" being a planner, but they are used to my taking pictures of random bus stops and rain gardens for ideas back home.

Q. What qualifications do you need to be a city planner?

A. The first question most people who are interested in becoming a city planner ask is whether there are any educational, licensing or certification requirements in Maine. The answer is no. However, there are many suggested routes to consider. Higher education in public administration and in planning are certainly a benefit. The American Planning Association (APA) offers educational opportunities along with the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), a nationwide independent credentialing program.

There are also great regional groups that can assist your journey such as the Northern New England Chapter of the American Planning Association (NNECAPA) and our own Maine Association of Planners (MAP). The Maine

Municipal Association (MMA) can also be a great asset, especially with training opportunities.

Q. What are the frustrations of the job? What are the things about the job

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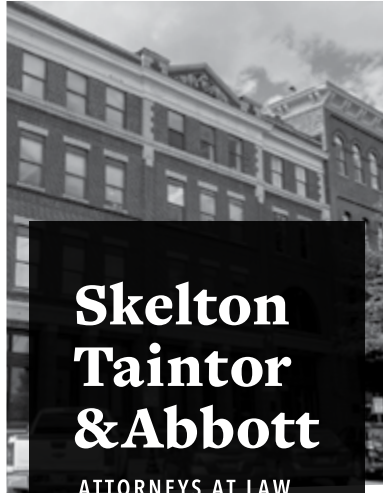
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that make you smile?

A. I am very fortunate to truly enjoy the work I am doing and wouldn't change a thing – except, perhaps, to have more bodies in my department. It seems there is never enough time to get everything done as well as I would like. I believe the most challenging aspect of municipal planning is funding. Planners in general have so many great ideas and work with so many great people, but the cost of



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Linda Johns, Brewer City Planner. (Photo by Ben Thomas)

implementation is often a roadblock. Some municipal budgets cannot even support a planner position.

I have always been an outdoor enthusiast and wanted to do my little part to make the world better. It is exciting and fulfilling to think that what

I do can positively impact how development is handled, how people physically get from one point to another, how our elderly live, how our environment is improved, or how parks and trails make people smile. You know, that quality of life thing. ■

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Clearing snow: Hallmark service that municipalities provide

In Brewer and Lewiston, two leading Public Works directors talk about the resiliency of their crews, despite winter's challenges. 'When it doubt, hook up' the plow.

By Steve Solloway

As February slipped into March, Dave Cote checked the pulse of the 10 snow plow operators for the City of Brewer. Maine winters can be hard on people who must keep roadways clear and 2017-18 has been no different.

"We can see the light at the end of the tunnel," said Cote, the city's Director of Public Works. "I encourage them. The winter will end. It always does."

Even if an April blizzard stalls the coming of spring.

In Maine, there is no more visible evidence of the services a municipality provides its residents than the flashing lights of a snow plow at work. No department may be subjected to more scrutiny than Public Works during snow seasons that can sometimes start with Halloween and end with Easter. From Kittery to Fort Kent, snowfall and icing amounts may be different but expectations of being able to drive on Maine's roads during the winter are not.

"My biggest concern is to keep everybody safe." Cote meant anyone who uses the local roads, but the underlying sentiment was clear: His plow drivers, who happen to be all males, are especially important to him.

"Everyone gets tired of Maine winters. My guys, too." Cote is talking actual weariness.

His crew plows 62 miles of city roads, 145 lane miles. Brewer uses one shift of drivers, which can mean driving 18 hours during a storm. The city actually has 11 operators, but one is on medical leave. For snow removal, carting the plowed snow away, Brewer has

several contracted drivers.

During storms, Cote urges his drivers to get out of their truck cabs and walk around. He urges them to take naps. He admits this part of his job as Director of Public Works can be similar to being a military officer or football coach.

Snow plow operators are alone in their truck cabs, after most municipalities removed the practice of having a second driver riding shotgun, during budget cuts. Cote sees a team.

"My guys pick each other up," said Cote. "They know they have a job to do, to see it through. If someone's not feeling well, they all pitch in."

Harder to find

Cote and the City of Brewer are examples of many Maine municipalities – who do not contract out snow plowing and removal – paying attention to their human assets. Simply put, snow plow operators are not replaced easily. The state's low unemployment rate and its aging population have left a shallow available labor pool. The unpredictable schedule and long hours can deter applicants.

News that the Maine Department of Transportation was having difficulty for the second winter finding dozens of drivers to fill vacancies to plow state roads attracted attention. No Maine motorist wants to navigate an unplowed road after a storm.

"People have had a hard time finding and keeping drivers," said Cote, who serves on the Maine Chapter of American Public Works Association board. "The long hours are a factor. It could be slow or you could live (at the town garage and in the plow truck). We've had people who couldn't make it through their first winter."

In Lewiston, Megan Bates says she is looking at six vacancies on her "B Team" although that is due to budget cutbacks, not an inability to find applicants. Bates is the city's Deputy Director of Highway and Open Spaces. Her plowing contingent of 67 men clears 187 miles and 300 lane miles. Her "A Team" works the first shift before giving way to the "B Team." Lewiston does have several "full-time, part timers" who were brought in during the snow season because of medical leaves.

'Bring your toothbrush'

Despite two shifts, drivers can spend very long hours on the roads. "Some are 'bring your toothbrush' storms," said Bates, who is also president of the Maine Chapter APWA. "We try to get down to pavement in 24 hours (after the storm passes). We have good crews. We're a family."

An older family. The average age of a snow plow operator in Lewiston is nearly 52.

"We're going to see a lot of people leave at once," said Bates. She's been Deputy Director for 10 years and didn't sound worried. For all its demands, the job has its rewards, such as the satisfaction of serving the public and seeing immediate results from the long hours – clear roads. The job also comes with a certain independence and, of course, responsibility.

"Inside the cab is another world," said Bates. "You sit high above the road. You have all these controls, particularly if you're also (treating) the road behind you. I don't know that there's a special kind of person who makes a good driver. Really, a clean driving record is important."

Meaning, a clean record can indicate patience, the ability to stay calm

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and an awareness of surroundings on the road.

Snow plow operators must have a Commercial Driver's License, which was a roadblock for some applicants in both the written and driving tests. Bates and Cote pointed out that many municipalities now provide and support classes and training to help those applying for snow plow operator positions.

"Education and information have become very important," said Bates. The investment of training has another benefit: Drivers are less likely to leave because they appreciate how the department helped them.

Administrators and managers such as Cote and Bates also have more access to information. Actual snow plows haven't changed too much over the years, other than the aids provided by computerization of controls and instruments. Road treatment mixtures have evolved but essentially remain



A city plow truck, ready and waiting. (Photo by Burgess Marketing)

sand, salt and a second chemical deicing agent.

Bates says there are now social media and web-based resources for Public Works directors to access information and solve problems.

The great variable is the weather. Access to more reliable information, more quickly is always important. But Maine weather is notorious for its unpredictability. Bates laughs. "We have a saying. When in doubt, hook it up."

Meaning, get the plows back on the trucks.

"We've had odd storms," said Cote,

speaking only for his Brewer location. "Many storms changing from snow to ice. A lot of daytime storms, which means more traffic on the roads. We still come up on people with bad tires and two-wheel drive who get stuck. We've had more drawn-out storms."

Thaws plus ice

Maine has been fortunate this winter to have several thawing periods that have provided some rest of snow plow operators, although there is the work of clearing storm drains and tackling remaining snow banks that create visibility problems. Then there's the

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stubborn stretches of ice, inches thick, that has resisted melting says Cote.

Winter weather tests everyone. “You kind of do need a thick skin,” said Cote. “We have 9,000 people in Brewer and we may get a handful (who criticize snow removal efforts.) Especially at the end of a rough winter. They’re tired of it. Sometimes they forget our guys are tired, too. And after their shift they have to go home and dig themselves out.

“We’ll get the calls from people saying we took out their mailbox. We go out and replace it.”

Cote and Bates catch as many complaints as they can, shielding their operators. As always, communication is key. Cote talks of “one gentleman” who sent him an email voicing his complaints of the town’s snow plowing. “I answered him, politely, explaining,” said Cote. “He got back to me, thanking me for helping him understand.”

Bates empathizes with homeowners on corner lots who must deal with city snow plows coming from two directions and leaving some snow behind, blocking driveways and pushed on other parts of the property. She answers the calls or emails and explains.

Bates says this year the feedback from Lewiston residents has been very positive. She’s not quite sure why. “We’ve asked for the public’s help a lot in staying off the roads and making it easier for our plows to get through. We have a lot of equipment but not all of it is perfect for (narrower) residential roads, for instance.

“We share the emails (from thankful residents) with the crews. It’s an amazing morale booster.”

“We’ll see dozens of doughnuts sent to the garage,” said Cote. “One lady supplied a spaghetti dinner for the crew.”

Administrators like Cote and Bates foster a sense of pride in a job well done. Cote lives outside Brewer in a more rural environment. Does he critique the roads he uses when he drives home? “I do, I can’t help it.”

Bates agrees. “Of course I do. We’re human.”

Would either look for a Public Works director position elsewhere, to get away from the long winters? Say, the Deep South?

“No,” said Cote, laughing. “They’ve got their issues. Maine is my home. I

enjoy our four seasons.”

Bates was emphatic. She would “never” look out of state. “We Mainers

are tough. We know how to deal with our winters. You have to embrace the winter to survive.” ■

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