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Interview with Jack Dexter by Nicholas Christie

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Dexter, Jack

Interviewer

Christie, Nicholas

Date

June 28, 2001

Place

Portland, Maine

ID Number

MOH 288

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Biographical Note

Jack F. Dexter, Jr. was born July 21, 1943 in Hartford, Connecticut. He moved to Maine when he was eleven years old and lived in Portland, Saco, Cape Elizabeth, and then at the time of this interview, Edgecomb. He went to college at Westland in Connecticut and then to Wharton at the University of Pennsylvania for his graduate degree in city government. He got a grant between his sophomore and junior years of college that allowed him to study government in Portland, Maine and this introduced him to John Menario and his future employment with the city of Portland. He started as assistant city manager to Menario and moved on to run the Model Cities program, which he did for 18 months. From there, he went to work for the Portland Housing Authority for two and a half years. He then was hired to be the city administrator of Saco, Maine and he stayed there for four and a half years, before leaving city government. After working briefly as the president of the Maine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, he went to work for the cable company Time (now Time-Warner-AOL). He later worked for A. G. Edwards, where he was employed at the time of this interview.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: educational background; Portland, Maine in the 1960s; John Menario; Portland West Advisory Council; Gerry Conley; Dexter family political background;

Dexter's experience running the Portland Housing Authority; Model Cities, Portland; Jadine O'Brien; Dexter's challenges as the city administrator in Saco, Maine; Maine's major political leaders; Dexter's experience as a lobbyist; Maine Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and a Model Cities anecdote.

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Transcript

Nicholas Christie: This is an interview with Jack Dexter on June 28th, 2001 at his office at A. G. Edwards in Portland, Maine. The interviewer is Nick Christie. Mr. Dexter, would you please state and spell your full name for the record?

Jack Dexter: Sure, my real name is John F. Dexter, Jr., and it's D-E-X-T-E-R.

NC: And where and when were you born?

JD: I was born 7/21/43 in Hartford, Connecticut.

NC: Okay, how long did you live there?

JD: Actually I moved up here when I was eleven, so I've only in Maine forty-seven years.

NC: And you've been living around the Portland area?

JD: Actually no, I've lived in Portland, I've lived in Saco, I've lived in Cape Elizabeth, and I've lived in Edgecomb which is where I currently live, which is up near Boothbay Harbor.

NC: Now where did you go to your secondary schooling?

JD: I went to Westland in Connecticut, and then I went to Wharton at the University of Pennsylvania for my graduate degree.

NC: What year did you -?

JD: And actually my graduate degree was in city government, and which is how I ended up working for the city and ended up running the Model Cities program. And I got my graduate degree in '67.

NC: Sixty-seven. How did you decide that you wanted to get involved with government in terms of schooling?

JD: Actually, when I was in college I was taking sort of samples of various kinds of courses and from various disciplines to see what I wanted to do when I grew up. And I took, you know, religion, I took some humanities courses, I took some sociology and, you know, the social science courses, and I took government. And during my sophomore year in college I went to my professor and asked if I could get a job in Washington for the summer because I was hoping I might go into the civil service, to the Foreign Service at that point. He couldn't find anything for me, but he had a grant that allowed me to come home and study the city of Portland government. And in the process I met the then city manager, John Menario, who was desperate for a summer intern and hired me for the summer.

So I got to research my paper while I was actually working for the city and getting paid for it. And I did that for three years, and when I was getting close to graduation, with the help of John Menario I got into Phelps Institute which is the local state government arm of Wharton, and just sort of one thing led to another. And I came back to Portland when I called John Menario and ask him if he would be my reference for a job I was applying for in Manchester, Connecticut. And he said, "I won't be a reference because I want you to come back and work for me." So that's how I got back to Portland.

NC: It was a clear message.

JD: It was a clear message. It was obviously where I was intended to be.

NC: Now you mentioned that you originally got a grant to study Portland.

JD: Yes.

NC: What were your initial findings about how the government works?

JD: Well actually it was very interesting because I did that in about 1962 or '63 and Portland was at that point very much a have-not city. It had lost more than twenty thousand in population after WWII, there were a lot of dilapidated neighborhoods, some of which later became the area that was covered by the Model Cities program. There was no interest in business in reinvesting in the city, there was no international ferry, there was a very poor traffic plan downtown. Portland was definitely, again, a have-not sort of down and out city. It was a remarkable change from then until I left the city in the seventies, left city government in Portland in the seventies.

The story I remember, and it may not be exactly factually accurate, but there was a plan prepared, if my memory serves me correctly, it was prepared by Victor Gruin Architects and Engineers about how Portland could develop. And that plan was presented to the Portland City Council and it was deemed to be too grand and too costly and was put on the shelf. And when John Menario became city manager, John had the foresight, again this is the way I remember it, to bring the plan out but bring it to the council piecemeal. And one step at a time made perfect sense, and the council, also a different council at that point, was able to grasp it. And I would credit John Menario with being the one who made Portland what it is today in terms of having the vision.

One of my favorite stories, and this doesn't have anything to do with necessarily with Ed Muskie, but John Menario went off and tried to raise a million dollar guarantee so that the ferry service could, international ferry service could come to Portland. If he'd ever asked me, I would have said he was crazy to do it because nobody would ever raise this guarantee. But I think about a hundred businessmen pledged ten thousand dollars apiece to get this ferry to come to Portland. The ferry was so successful at the end of the first year, they forgave the guarantee and all the money was never collected. The international ferry was kind of the beginning of Portland's renaissance. And again, I would credit John Menario with that.

So I've really seen Portland go from being a pretty dreary place without much optimism or hope to getting a vision, which I credit a lot to John Menario, and then ultimately being a pretty nice city to live in. In fact, a very nice city to live in and with a lot of prospects and opportunities.

NC: It's interesting when you were describing Portland when you first came here, and thinking of Lewiston now. I don't know how familiar you are with the economic situation in Lewiston.

JD: I know they've had some tough times.

NC: Yeah, and that lack of optimism and hope that you say you think started Portland going in the right direction through these individuals.

JD: I think there was actually a more shared vision in Portland then than there is now where, you know, I think when you arrive, if you don't set new visions that people agree on you end up having a lot more disunity. And when there seemed to be some clear vision, or seems to be some clear vision and some goals of where people ought to be going. I think the other thing is that there certainly has been a loss of local leadership. A lot of the locally owned banks and businesses, you know, are now not locally owned any more and the leaders may be good people but their commitment to Portland is not the same. So I think that when you read about the loss of indigenous leadership that that is true.

NC: Now that brings us right to the Model Cities program, and I was wondering if you could, well let's start with how did you get involved with the program initially?

JD: I was assistant city manager working for John Menario. The individual who had been running the program for the first eighteen months or so, maybe two years, left the state, left to go elsewhere to work. John asked me if I would take over the program at that point. You know,

there were some interesting discussions going on at that point as to whether or not it should be a bricks and mortar program, or whether it should be a social program. There were some significant I think disagreements, although as I'll illustrate with one incident later on that I think is pretty significant. They weren't bitter disagreements, but they were certain heartfelt disagreements between the Portland West Advisory Committee, which had a very significant citizen population, and the Portland city council and administration as to what the direction of the program ought to be.

Looking at the city today, it's pretty clear that they came to an accommodation, and that the city as the result of Model Cities program eventually took on a very different view of what a city was supposed to do for its citizens. But at the time, welfare was the traditional welfare, the city was basically bricks and mortar and, you know, the traditional services. And finding a way to use Model Cities money to further the goals of the city as they had been traditionally viewed I think was the administration and council's objective.

NC: The city council.

JD: The city council's. The Portland West Advisory Committee wanted very much for the program to enable the city to get involved in new areas.

NC: And when you say the city, in terms of the West Advisory, you're really speaking about the citizens doing it for themselves.

JD: Actually, the Portland West Advisory Committee wanted two things. They wanted more say in how the city ran, or at least the Model Cities area ran, and they wanted the city to become more heavily involved in services that had not traditionally municipal services. And the city council and to some extent the administration saw that what the city ought to be doing was providing services to the Model Cities area that were more along the lines of traditional services: new sidewalks, new streets, things like that.

NC: Parks.

JD: Parks, that's right. It wasn't the city wanted the money to go somewhere else, it was that the city wanted to invest the money in things that they thought would be lasting in the traditional sense, bricks and mortar things. And the, to oversimplify, the Portland West Advisory Committee wanted to see a more social service directed program.

NC: And you personally managed the West Advisory Council?

JD: No, actually I was the administrator in the middle, you know, I worked for the city manager basically. I mean I was part of the city's administrative structure and therefore was responsible to the manager and the council, and I was the, you know, chief staff person to the Portland West Advisory Committee. I would only characterize the interface between those two groups, though, as being tremendously positive. You know they, the municipal opinions, that is the traditional government opinions were arrived at after, you know, like two hundred years of municipal government. There's nothing wrong with them. The Portland West Advisory

Committee brought a new set of priorities to the table. And as I said if you look at what Portland is today you realize that there was a tremendous synergy that resulted from the dialogue that took place around that issue, and to the point where the things that were hotly debated in 1972 are taken for granted today.

So, I see the biggest, the biggest legacy of the Model Cities program is real institutional change in two ways. One is, when I first started going to city council meetings as an intern, summer intern, when I was an undergraduate, I was sometimes the only person who was at the city council meeting. And if there was one other person, it was an individual named Popkins Zakarian who eventually ended up on the city council. And frequently we would be the only two, quote, members of the public, and I was actually a part time staff person at the meeting. And by the time the Model Cities program was in full swing in '72, a period of maybe like five or six years later, it was not uncommon to have seventy, eighty, a hundred people at city council meetings. So, I mean that's huge. And that has continued today. And again, and then the impact on the kind of services that were delivered by the city is lasting as well, still.

NC: Now when LBJ in '66 originally got the bill, or the money to be allocated to all these different areas out in the country, he had a set of ideals that he wanted to see, that his administration wanted to see the money work towards. When you and your, the city council of Portland encountered that money for the first time, how clear was it that there was an agenda on a national level that you had to follow?

JD: Actually, my recollection of that agenda was that it was pretty loose. And the, you know, time makes perspective pleasant, but my recollection of that program was that it was based on the theory that if you ask people who had social and economic problems what they needed in order to solve those social and economic problems, if they could tell you, and then if you worked, it was sort of a partnership. You know, they could at least tell you where it hurt and what they thought they needed, and then there were government people who could help shape the product that would address those issues. So it was supposed to be, you know, a merging of the people with the needs, defining those needs, and helping to define those needs, and the people with the ability to deliver remedy being able to deliver remedy. Another way to look at it was not government doing on to you, but it was a participatory democracy kind of thing where you ask people in the neighborhood what do you need to make your neighborhood work better and make your lives work better, and then you put together a package that could deliver that.

So I saw it as having a huge amount of self-determination involved. And I think that's a fairly accurate perception, and to the extent that that, if I'm right, then I believe the program was very well implemented in Portland because the PWAC, the Portland West Advisory Committee in fact did have a huge influence on what was going on. And ultimately the biggest disagreements were between Portland West Advisory Committee and neighborhood organizations as to how the money would be spent, and not between the Portland West Advisory Committee and the city council.

NC: That kind of touches on, when you say neighborhood associations, and I'm thinking the, sort of the quote that goes along with the Model Cities program, "the U.S. would seek to improve the lives of the slum dwellers," "the war on poverty", and then you consider that when

a program like this comes along and money is a question of business needs to be improved if employment is going to be improved, but at the same time you have housing rehabilitation and questions like that. And how, is that, where did the council versus the neighborhood associations stand on where to begin?

JD: Actually there was never any disagreement as to where the money should be spent. And there was never disagreement that it ought to be spent on things to benefit the neighborhood. The disagreement was around what things benefited the neighborhood and what things would benefit the neighborhood on a lasting basis. And the traditional city view was it was physical things that improved the neighborhood. You planted trees, you repaired the sidewalks, you paved the streets. You know, those, the people who were somewhat politically disenfranchised mainly because they didn't know how to use the system, you know, lived in neighborhoods with the more and the more run down sidewalks and the more run down streets, and in fact they were older sidewalks and streets. So, you know, the city's traditional view was if you want to improve the life of these people you pave the streets and repair the sidewalks and plant new trees and do new parks and improve the infrastructure. So, but it was never, it was never that I can remember any intent or attempt to make the money work for other than the residents of the city.

With one possible exception, and that's the fact that by financing infrastructure improvements in the Model Cities area with Model Cities money, you obviously freed up money to finance infrastructure improvement in other parts of the city. So to the extent that there was an attempt to replace money that the city might have spent in the Model Cities area. So, you know, there might have been some of that.

But by and large, both the council and the administration were committed to improving the Model Cities area, and committed to the ideals of the program. And the only issue was, you know, what are the ideals of the program as they translate into things on the ground in the area? Portland I think was quite unique. I mean, there was a, as I said, there's one instance that really sticks in my mind above all others in the Model City program that set this program apart. And, you know, it sort of illustrated the fact that there was no deep ill will anywhere in the program between the residents and the city, or between even factions in the city.

NC: So you worked as you said for eighteen months.

JD: Yes.

NC: And then in 1972?

JD: Although, my association was longer than that, mainly because when I was in the city manager's office I was looking at the program, too, from. In fact my office was next to the Model Cities office and that point the program was very important to the city and in the city. And, I mean, I may even have the numbers around, but I think we were getting a million and a half a year and that was big shot in those days in Portland. So, you know, it was always important to Portland, so even, it was, I had at least three and a half or four year association with the program, even though I only ran it for a year and a half or two years.

NC: I'm going to throw a few names at you, Gerard Conley?

JD: Gerry Conley.

NC: Gerry? Okay, Gerry Conley?

JD: I think, yeah.

NC: He was the chairman of the West Advisory Committee Program and the Model Cities Program? Can you tell me anything about him?

JD: Later became a city councilor, he was a really good guy, was I think probably motivated to politics because he thought he could do some good. I mean I think that's the only reason that he ever was involved in city government. He had a, if I remember, memory serves me, he had a night job at the railroad or something like that.

NC: Really?

JD: I think this is right, and you know, basically practically wore himself out between his community commitment and supporting his family. I remember not always agreeing with Gerry Conley, but I remember him always being gentlemanly and respectful of other people's opinions, and yet a man who really had strong beliefs; very committed to this neighborhood. I don't know what happened to him, is he still alive?

NC: I'm not sure. I know he went on to be a state legislator I think?

JD: Yeah, he did.

NC: State senate?

JD: Yup.

NC: But I'm not sure where, anything, I found a Web site on him, I don't know much about him. In terms of partisan politics in Portland, not just concerning the Model Cities program but for your entire experience working at the city and government level, how, I mean this is a Democratic city, this is a city where the Democratic party is more strong would you say, or?

JD: I would expect that that would be the case, but all the time that I was there the elections were nonpartisan, they still are I think. I haven't paid much attention. It's funny, when you get out of government, you sort of leave it behind. But, partisan politics were nonexistent, okay? There had been several changes in city government but there were, as I recall, six councilors elected from their districts and three running at large back in those days. The ones elected from their districts, you know, were committed to their districts, but there also was larger vision, or that's not fair because, yeah there was, by then there was a vision taking shape, there was a larger vision. And I don't remember, certainly there were no partisan politics, the party just didn't matter in that situation.

NC: You're speaking of around Portland.

JD: Around Portland, yeah.

NC: Now you -

JD: In Portland government. I mean, I'm not saying that the parties weren't active on a state level, for example, or a federal level, but Portland was definitely, in my opinion, definitely, I don't remember party politics playing any significant role at all.

NC: Now you went through places that you grew up in Maine. I'm trying to figure out, where were you then, in the fifties?

JD: I moved to Maine in '55 and I was in Cape Elizabeth.

NC: Cape Elizabeth.

JD: Yeah.

NC: Okay. So you had the opportunity to in some sense see the Democratic Party on a state level in Maine grow.

JD: I really didn't pay any attention to the Democratic Party. I mean I didn't get interested in government until I was in college. My parents were, you know, Republicans and, but I never, I was an independent. In fact, really still am an independent although I occasionally enroll in a party in order to influence a primary. But other than that, you know, I consider myself, actually I guess I am about as independent as you can be in terms of your outlook. And if you, philosophically I would probably be a social Democrat and a fiscal Republican, like so many moderates are, you know.

NC: So after you, after your job working for the Model Cities program, where did you go next?

JD: I went down to, I went over to the Portland Housing Authority and ran the Housing Authority for two and a half years.

NC: And what were your major responsibilities?

JD: Actually, there was renewal going on, there was demolition of old housing going on, there was some economic revival going on, and there weren't good places to relocate people. There was a really shortage as there is now of affordable housing. So we built a lot of housing during the two and half years I was there, which I, I don't get a lot of credit for in that my predecessor had made most of the applications. But there was some lack of coordination between the Housing Authority and the Model Cities program, and the city and the renewal authority in trying to smoothly transition people from bad housing to good housing, and from redevelopment

areas. And so, you know, basically by moving me over there, since I was the only one who had worked for the city and worked for the Model Cities program and worked closely with the renewal authority, I sort of understood that this other piece was really important. So, I mean it was simple things, like making the number one priority for public housing people who were displaced by city government action, whether it was condemnation of buildings or whatever.

NC: Delicate balance to work with.

JD: Yeah, it was a delicate balance.

NC: Then there's the business side of course.

JD: Yeah, actually the golden triangle, which is One City Center, that area, there was some housing there but there also was some business, dilapidated business there. And that area required some relocation of families. But a lot of the relocation of families was from the Bayside neighborhood where it wasn't to replace business, it was because the housing was really dilapidated and needed to be condemned because it was unsafe. And, you know, we, we also wrote demolition grants and, you know, tore down housing that was completely beyond repair and built new housing. And we also used the lease housing program when we could.

NC: Now this is probably an obvious answer, there's probably an obvious answer to this question, but when you demolished the buildings being condemned, how is it decided what sort of housing, specifically in terms of cost, would be put up?

JD: The vast majority of what was rebuilt was low income housing. I'm not sure that you could say that that was entirely altruistic, I don't think anybody wanted to live in those neighborhoods either. I mean, it was, and a lot of what was happening was that, first of all there was a lot of surplus housing. Remember we'd, I mean it was not liveable but there were a lot, because we lost a lot of population, you know, there was surplus housing at that point. And it was dangerous. And there were also grants given to rehabilitate the housing that could be rehabilitated in the same neighborhoods, so there was a lot, a lot going on. Even thinking now, you can think of relatively few high income or even middle income housing units that I can think of in the areas that were impacted by the Model Cities program, and you can see a lot of public housing, both for the elderly and for families, that was great, you know.

NC: I was just thinking, I was looking around at different sites about Model Cities program influences on other cities at the time. Portland, Oregon, you know, quite a bit, is an example there. There was the demolishing aspect to the unsafe housing, or the very low income housing. But there was an incredible pressure from business in Oregon to replace that with commercial zoning and commercial districting, and that, but that wasn't an issue here.

JD: I don't remember that being an issue at all here. No, I remember, you know, demolishing houses and building neighborhood parks. I remember demolishing houses and not building anything because it was, you know, there was nothing that needed, I mean that just didn't need anything. We lived in an era then, though, where you went first of all to, you built all the low income housing in one place because it was available land, it was cheap, you just demolished the

houses that were on it and you wanted to keep people in the same neighborhood. That was one of the arguments, you know, they were close to their neighborhood schools and close to the infrastructure that, the community facilities, you know, the churches, whatever it was they were connected to. Then we went through the period of, you know, not fair to do that, build it out of town, you know, so we built Riverton at that point, that project actually was underway when I was there, and Presumscott Street, Front Street. Then we went through the period of, you don't want to build clusters at all, you want to do rental housing and give people vouchers. I mean, all of those were considered to be the socially appropriate thing to do at the time for all the right reasons, you know, so, -

NC: So it sounds like you -

JD: and they all had negative reasons, too, you know, why you're doing it. But I'm trying to remember whether I can think of any turning over of land other than what was in the golden triangle that might have had residential in it, but it also had a lot of commercial in it. I mean, it was already a commercial area and it might have been mixed housing. I just don't remember that as a major issue, or complaint of anybody that we were doing that.

NC: So it sounds like you believe the program was a success in Portland.

JD: Oh yeah, I really do. But not so much for the bricks and mortars, as I said, yeah.

NC: More from a community sense.

JD: Well, yeah. Actually, it was because, I mean to be very focused about it, it was unheard of for the city to finance a day care center for example prior to Model Cities. And, you know, during the Model Cities program, Model Cities money was used to finance child, actually day care's the wrong word, child development centers. And I think the city is still funding child development centers. It was unheard of for the city to have a crime prevention youth involvement program. The police services were delivered in the traditional arrest and prosecute way. We had a Model Cities financed Police Athletic League and a Model Cities formed crime prevention unit that worked aggressively in the Model Cities area. So the police department was fundamentally changed, you know, by the program. I think the way welfare services were developed, were changed, too, but I'm not sure I can speak as clearly to that.

But the city began using what was considered dollars, i.e., the Model Cities money to finance social services other than traditional welfare services and that still exists so that was a major change. And citizen involvement was the other major change. The fact that it wasn't a nuisance, well it may be a nuisance but it's a necessary and desirable nuisance to have many voices heard.

NC: And with citizen an involvement comes eventually citizen leadership.

JD: Yes, yes.

NC: Nothing to you don't have when you have (*unintelligible phrase*).

JD: Yeah, although unfortunately the public still looks at somebody who is running for election as the good person, as somebody who gets elected, the next day they're 'them' and that's really too bad.

NC: This is all coming together at the same as programs like Head Start. And, I don't know, I'm curious to know how connected you, you just mentioned that Model City money went to like the PAL and the crime prevention, but there must have been other social legislation coming through that probably had an effect in working with -

JD: There was, and you know, the program was fairly large and, you know, I mean obviously, but my perspective gets fuzzy. I think the money was frequently used legally, morally, to provide local dollars to match federal dollars from other programs. I think we did that, and that that was encouraged, you know, with an understanding that sooner or later you were going to have to replace the Model Cities dollars or with local dollars, or replace all the dollars with local dollars if you wanted to keep the programs going. There were I think significant school programs that were established, too, in the schools. But, I mean I, it's been too long for me to remember all of it, but the Model Cities money certainly was used to leverage to the extent that it could be.

NC: Sounds like a wonderful experience (*unintelligible phrase*).

JD: Yeah, actually it was really kind of an interesting experience.

NC: Now, after you finished that two and a half year, well first of all you preceded Jadine O'Brien?

JD: I did, she was my assistant.

NC: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about her?

JD: She was terrific. Jadine was one of those people that you couldn't give enough work to do, she would always finish it in half the time that you thought she would. She was tremendously well organized, very competent as an administrator, very hard worker, I think really believed in what she was doing. She'd been an assistant to a congressman prior to that, I think was instrumental in helping Portland get the Model Cities grant. And basically was a very competent, gifted administrator in my opinion.

NC: So, while she was running the Portland Model Cities program, you spent two and a half years -

JD: At the Housing Authority.

NC: The Housing Authority. And then where did you go after that?

JD: I went to run the city of Saco, which I did for four and a half years, and then I left city government.

NC: When you say run the city of Saco, you mean you were city manager?

JD: I was city administrator, yeah, they don't have a manager. It was called an administrator, but yes.

NC: And I'm not familiar, where is Saco?

JD: South of here.

NC: South of here?

JD: Yes, two towns south, three towns south.

NC: Is that an experience in any way similar to what you had been doing in Portland?

JD: No, actually it wasn't. I was the first city manager of Saco and they were already circulating petitions to get rid of the new city manager form of government before I even had my first day in the office. The city had no systems whatsoever, there was no budget. In fact it was, I think I started April Fool's Day, their fiscal year began in January and they didn't have a budget yet for the year. It was a city that had just outgrown amateur leadership, so it was quite a different experience. And actually it was certainly a party politics city, which I was not used to at all, I was used to a non-partisan environment. We had no staff to speak of, many of the department heads although competent were strictly appointments, they were only appointed as long as the party was in power that was in power when they were appointed, and then they were replaced. There was a personnel board that was essentially created to make sure that there was some political influence in the way municipal employees were selected, you know, all of that. It has long changed, but -

NC: Sounds frustrating.

JD: It was, and that's why I only stayed four years, four and a half years, and that's why I actually left city government. I just decided, I got sort of discouraged with the proper process and, I mean I realize we have the best government processes in the world but they're still very difficult to work in. And I was an activist and I've always been an activist, I was the one who was willing to stand up and take the arrows and make recommendations that weren't popular. And I found the elected officials very willing to go along sometimes, but not to stand up and take the heat.

I mean, for example, when I got there we were plowing seventy-five private driveways with municipal equipment, which was illegal. And I said, "We're not going to do this any more." And the council held a public hearing and people threatened to kill me if their houses burned down. And we were plowing one guy's driveway who then went out and plowed other people's driveways, you know, with his snowplow. I mean, it was purely patronage kinds of things and we stopped that. We were only ticketing the cars on Main Street that didn't belong to the merchants, you know, when they overtime parked, you know, all of that stuff. And Saco

became, you know, the kind of professionally city, evenly distributing justice like you're supposed to do, and not just delivering patronage to people. But, you know, you make a lot of enemies when you do that kind of thing. I just got tired of it all, got tired of the weekend phone calls and, you know, all those kinds of things.

NC: Frustrating, but in some satisfying probably to see things change.

JD: Yeah, I mean, I look at Saco now with some of the things that we started, like the industrial park that was dormant that we, you know, resurrected, and some other significant improvements and I'm happy about those. But I'm glad not to be doing that any more.

NC: Now, before I move on to what you did after you left the public realm, I just want to talk a little bit about, you mentioned partisan politics in Saco and so on. Not just Muskie, but concerning the Democratic Party and its influence in Maine, what can you tell me about how you saw it operate, at least on a local level?

JD: You know, it's interesting, I didn't see the party operate, per se. I saw leaders operate. I mean, you know, two of the greatest visionaries that the state's ever produced are Muskie and Mitchell who both happen to be Democrats. On the other hand, you've got Margaret Chase Smith who, she lived in a different time in a lot of ways. And she may not be responsible for a Model Cities program but she told Joe McCarthy where to get off. And, you know, those are, I mean those are significant things. What Mitchell has done in Ireland and now trying to do in the Middle East is a world changing kind of thing, you know. He's a product of the Democratic Party in Maine. What Muskie did with the Clean Air Act and the Model Cities program, no matter how you believe they played out, you know, from a political point of view, you know, those are certainly nation changing events. And, you know, Margaret Chase Smith having the courage to stand up to McCarthy, I mean she was the first one to do it. So it may say as much about the independence that Maine people give their elected officials if they're good citizens and good, you know, quality people. It may say as much about that as it does about the Democratic Party, per se. But we certainly have produced in the twentieth century leaders beyond the size of the state or the influence that we have.

And again, I was always an independent, I've been around the state for a long time. I've never seen, and again, maybe I'm very naive, but I've never seen people rewarded or punished if they were municipal officials or municipalities because you were a Republican or a Democratic stronghold. So, you know, I think of Muskie and Mitchell and Smith as terrific leaders and individuals and not so much as representatives of their party. And I, you know, it's interesting but I've always thought with rare exceptions that people admired those leaders regardless of whether they were Republicans or Democrats.

NC: Did you have any personal meetings with people on the state level, state legislators or -?

JD: Oh yeah, actually I ended up before this career, by the way, being head of the state chamber of commerce and I did a lot of lobbying, I did a lot of health care lobbying, spent a lot of time in the State House and so -

NC: In Augusta.

JD: Yeah, yeah, so you know, that's continued until '94 when I came here. But we used to go down to Washington and meet with the legislative leadership to, or the legislators, the senators and congress people in order to, you know, further the ends of the city, this city, the city of Saco and it would. And I met with people both on the state and federal level.

NC: You felt Muskie's influence in any way, or?

JD: You know, clearly when you have somebody of Muskie's stature who is a senator in Washington and you're applying for a federal grant and you ask for his help, you're assuming that, you know, he's going to make a phone call for you and that people are going to listen to that phone call. He obviously wasn't the only prominent legislator in Washington, but clearly he had a lot of clout.

He, in fact he and Mitchell and Smith all used their clout in a, not in a heavy-handed way I don't think. I mean I, they were, I'm sure they were very helpful but they were never I think abusive of people. They were actually sort of gentle folks, you know, in a really very human kind of way. And none of them in my opinion ever got too big for their britches, you know, they never forgot who they were or where they came from. So, you know, we've been really blessed in that regard.

NC: I'm going to flip this tape over.

End of Side A
Side B

NC: Resuming the interview with Jack Dexter, this is side B of tape one. We were talking about Muskie and, I want to move on to when you, you mentioned being the president of the Maine Chamber of Commerce and Industry. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your experience there.

JD: It was interesting. I consider myself goal oriented and process tolerant, which you have to be if you want to get anything done in government. If you only love the process, that takes forever, if you're only, you're goal oriented you can't stand the process. After seven years I had found myself to be a whole lot less process tolerant. I mean, I gradually got to the point where it was really hard to see change take place so slowly. But, for the most part I found the process to be a positive one. I was sort of known for being a person who wanted to build solutions as opposed to create controversy or participate in controversy, and so we were able to accomplish some things.

There are always a few scoundrels in government who take themselves too seriously, or who have motives that are not in the public's best interest. And those people are always very frustrating to me, and I'm not going to mention any names but, you know, there have been some changes like term limits that resulted from. You know, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Which is too bad, I mean I think for the most part the vast majority of

people who serve on both sides of the aisle in Augusta are generally good people. I think that's also true in Washington. But I think that on some occasions the leadership or certain individuals put party first and state or country second, or at least give that impression, and I think that is disillusioning to people. It is to me. And no party has immunity to that. And again, my impression after the years I've been around government is that the vast majority of individuals in elected office are doing the best they can. And there are always a few who have motives that are not in the public's best interest and unfortunately we focus on them probably more than we should.

NC: Having the opportunity to go from the public sphere to the private sphere and seeing how the two interact, by working within each one, I don't quite know how to phrase this question, but how transparent do you think the system is, not just to the citizens but to the general populace of Maine or the U.S.?

JD: I'm not sure what you mean by transparent.

NC: Can people, can the average citizen see what's really going on in terms of their lawmakers?

JD: No, no, no, I think not at all. On the one hand, I suppose the old saying about you don't want to see sausages and laws being made is really true. On the one hand, the gridlock that takes place in government and the compromise is an absolutely necessary part of the democratic process. And it certainly keeps the country from veering, you know, radically to the left or radically to the right. And, you know, both sides ought to scare us because the extremes are not where most of us are.

It also, unfortunately I think, the compromise and stuff tends to mean that the best solutions don't always come out. We did some significant health care reform in Augusta. And it was done as the result of calling together the business community, the low-income community, the insurance community, the doctors and the hospitals and essentially creating our own solutions to the problems that existed. And taking those to the legislature as a package, and to the governor, and saying, "You know, we've all gotten together and we've all represented our constituents and we're technically the people who know the most about the problem. And here are the problems and solutions that we see in the health care system."

And it was very interesting because that, the package was passed on the last day of the legislative session, about three thirty or four o'clock in the morning. And the house of representatives in Augusta gave all of us who had been working on this package a standing ovation when it passed, which is really quite an unusual event. But it was such an unusual process and, you know, it's a model that I think ought to be used more often because the alternative is what I saw before I brought that group together.

The alternative was that the business community and the hospitals and the doctors and the low income folks and the insurance companies were all going to legislative committees and testifying for their own narrow interests. And the legislators who were probably dealing with two hundred other pieces of legislation and had no expertise were trying to craft a solution out of the

testimony that came from all of these groups. And it just didn't work. So, you know, it would take an ideal world, which doesn't exist, but the, the system is the best system but the way people utilize the system isn't maximizing its value yet, and we may never.

NC: Really you're talking about a whole new way of life, a whole new -

JD: I'm talking about a whole new way of problem solving and law making, with the end result being the same. That you have, you know, Republicans and Democrats representing their constituents, but you have more holistic solutions being built. I mean, I see every day the craziness of the tax system and the craziness of the various retirement plans and the fact that they don't work together because they've all been crafted by groups working on micro problems as opposed to macro issues. And, you know, I think, I think government could be much more effective if people could see the forest through the trees and would work on systems.

If legislators, for example in, from Maine created committees of labor and business and, or the constituencies for whatever the problem was and say, "Go solve this problem and bring me back a solution." You know, you might some really interesting ideas. As opposed to listening to labor, listening to business, you know, the solution is often not A or B but it's C, and no constituent group is going to bring you C by itself.

NC: And no legislature is going find C in their own time.

JD: They're not going to be able to find time to do it, nor do they have the expertise.

NC: Right. So after you, the health care issues that you brought through your work at the Maine Chamber of Commerce, were there other examples where you were able to put together multi-constituent groups?

JD: That was by far and away the best. Other issues had been so polarized, like worker's compensation, usually so polarized, you know, for so many years that -

NC: And still is.

JD: And still is. The people weren't able to put their, and frankly as the business communities representative I probably would have been viewed as a turncoat if I had done that. The thing is that we got on the health care issue before it was a polarizing issue, everybody just knew we had a problem.

NC: And look at health care now, in Maine.

JD: Yeah, what we did was only a delaying situation. I mean there's this huge wave, well the bottom with health care is that we all want more health care than anybody can pay for, you know, that's just the truth. It doesn't matter when you're sick, you know, you're going to want it all. You're not going to say, that's too expensive, okay, I'm going to die or, you know, I'm going to go blind or I'm going to go deaf or whatever. So we can't afford all the health care that we want, and nobody can afford it, you know, it's a zero sum game.

NC: (*Unintelligible word*) the issue of privatizing health care?

JD: I'm still not convinced that a single payer system will ever work effectively. I mean, I have no evil thoughts toward government, but bureaucracy that big they can't be efficient. And there are too many political compromises that have to be, that are made, and there needs more choice than that and there needs competition, and so it, you know. I just think, look at the Defense Department, you know, they're just too big, you know, I mean, and they have to be and we're going to live with all that. But you're not ever going to make them efficient, you're not ever going to make them holistic because of all the competing political pressures that are on them, you know. I just don't want that for health care. Personally.

NC: (*Unintelligible phrase*) makes sense. Now, I found that, I've written somewhere that you were the former manager of Time-Warner?

JD: Actually I ran the cable company here. I was, it wasn't Time-Warner then, it was Public Cable. It was before Time, well, when I went to work for the company it was part locally owned and part owned by a company in Denver called ATC. ATC was bought by Time-Warner. And eventually the local interests were bought out, I'm sorry, by Time, and then eventually the local interests were bought out by Time. And then Time-Warner merged and then Time-Warner-AOL merged, so it's. But I did work after Time acquired the company.

NC: You were working at the cable once Time came in.

JD: Yes, yeah.

NC: Okay.

JD: I mean, I was there before and after.

NC: And how many years were you working there?

JD: Eight and a half.

NC: And this is from eighty -?

JD: Oh, I don't know.

NC: Okay, okay.

JD: Let me see, I was with the chamber from '87 to '94, so it would have been '78 to '87, something like that I was with the. And I was with, and I was in government from about, here in Maine, from about '68 to '70.

NC: Is Roy Whitcomb (*unintelligible word*)?

JD: Oh yeah.

NC: Can you tell me about Roy?

JD: What can I tell you about Roy? Let me see. I mean, Roy worked with us in the Model Cities program. He also worked in Augusta while I was up there for the chamber; very nice man. I think he did public affairs and public relations, if I recall. But, I mean, I've known Roy for years but not intimately.

NC: Now, you mentioned that you had a few anecdotes that you wanted to tell us.

JD: Yeah, there's one story that I really love. I told you earlier that the majority of issues that were contentious really existed between neighborhood organizations and the Portland West Advisory Committee in terms of allocating money, primarily. And, I may have a couple of the details of this wrong, but not most of them. I believe it was a group called Youth In Action that came to the Portland West Advisory Committee to get some funding, and PWAC turned them down. It was a time when civil disobedience was sort of the thing to do and so. And it's important to know that civil disobedience in New Bedford, Massachusetts meant that they burned down the Model Cities building. So, and it was with this, this is in the same two week period that this particular incident happened, so -

NC: Sorry, maybe I'm naive on this. Why did they burn -?

JD: Oh, you know, people were ticked off at the Model Cities program so they burned the Model Cities building down, you know, some of the neighborhood residents. And during that same period the Portland West, I mean the Youth In Action people and their supporters marched into my office one morning and said, "Hi, we're here, we're going to do a sit-in." And I said, "You can't do a sit-in here." And they said, "Yeah, we're going to do a sit-in." And they sat down, and they didn't destroy anything or anything, just sat down on our desks so that we couldn't work. And so I said, "If you're going to do a sit-in we're going to have to call the police." And they said, "Yeah, we know." So I called the police chief, the police chief came over with some police officers and said, "Okay, you guys are all under arrest, come with me." I mean, no handcuffs, no billy clubs, no nothing. And they said, "Okay." So they all walked over to the police department, they all got booked. About two weeks later we all go off to court and I sit up in the stand and they tell me to point out the people who did the sit-in in my office, and I pointed to the people in the audience and they all got convicted, and we all walked back to city hall together.

And I tell you that only because it was, there was no deep-seated hatred or feelings of you're a bad guy, I'm a good guy, you know, kind of thing. People sort of had their roles to play. They were very serious about the roles, but they weren't serious about venom. And it was sort of indicative of a couple of things: it was indicative of the openness of the Portland process, it was indicative of the fact that people really got along pretty well, and even if they had different opinions they sort of respected that among each other. It's one of my favorite stories.

And there's a fellow named Bob Philbrick who's been an activist in low income causes for as

long as I can remember. And I happened to see Bob at a something a couple of weeks ago, it was an event in Augusta, and we were talking about the old days. And he said, "You don't remember." Bob is disabled, or is one of the more able disabled people you'll ever meet. But, I mean, he has a crutch and he's sort of hunchbacked and doesn't move as fast as you and I move. And he said, "You don't remember this but you did me a good favor one day." And I said, "What was that?" And he said, "Well I couldn't get to the sit-in quickly enough to get arrested, and when the chief, when I finally got there the chief was about to arrest me." And I said, "No, no, he wasn't here, don't arrest him."

NC: You said?

JD: I said that. So he said he still remembers that, I'd totally forgotten that.

NC: That's great. So that can't, that experience can't have been something that was shared nationally.

JD: I don't know what the experience was elsewhere, but I know that Model Cities experience was very positive for Portland, has made very long-term positive changes to the city, both in terms of political process and in terms of institutional change. And, you know, I think most people who would look at the program in twenty-five years hindsight would say, you know, where's the bricks and mortar, nothing happened, you know. But if you knew the city before from an institutional point of view, and you knew the city after, and you knew it from a participation point of view and you knew it after, then you realize that, you know, the changes were profound.

NC: So you enjoy working down in Portland?

JD: Oh yeah, I enjoy living in the country, but I think Portland is the most livable city that I know and it's a great place, and it's a much better place because of the incidents or the activities of the sixties, late sixties and seventies. And I guess my one fear about Portland now is the fact that it was a have-not with a vision of what a have ought to be, and now it's a have and I don't know if there's a shared vision. I think that's negative. I may be wrong, I -

NC: Do you have a vision of what you think Portland should do next?

JD: I just don't, no, I mean I don't. I'm not in the loop any more, you know. I mean I, there, I have colleagues who are still in government, who were in government when I was in government and I admire them because I can't live with that level of intensity.

NC: Right. Well I guess I'd want to ask, I know that your time is -

JD: Yeah, I think we should be wrapping up.

NC: Is there anything else you have to say?

JD: I think that's most of it.

NC: Okay, well, the Archive greatly appreciates your interview. Thank you.

JD: You're welcome.

End of Interview
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