

The Review

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Bridgman Wins Community Excellence Award

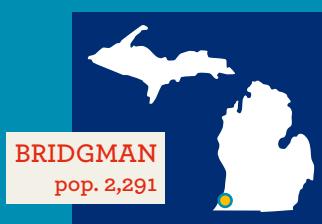
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CONGRATULATIONS
Bridgman



community
excellence
award



The Bridgman Courtyard:

From an Underutilized Space to a Vibrant Place

—By Morgan Schwank

L“Receiving the Michigan Municipal League’s Community Excellence Award is a thrilling validation that our small but mighty community’s belief in itself can lead to meaningful change.”

—City of Bridgman Manager Juan Ganum



The City of Bridgman’s Courtyard project was voted the 2023 Community Excellence Award by their peers at the League’s Convention in Traverse City this past October. The project transformed an underutilized parking lot in downtown Bridgman into a vibrant community gathering space. It was a true labor of love, and the passion behind the project had an immediate response from those in attendance.

Bridgman’s City Manager Juan Ganum recalled learning how the project was resonating with other local leaders: “One of the highlights for me at Convention was during one of the sessions; I had a woman who was a councilperson from Kalkaska. She was sitting behind me, and she leaned over, put her hand on my shoulder, and said ‘I’m voting for Bridgman’s project. I can see us doing something like that in our community.’”

The story of the project’s humble beginnings starts in the fall of 2020. Many businesses, especially restaurants, were unable to operate at full capacity because of social distancing requirements to fight the spread of COVID-19. The initial setup supported restaurants in Bridgman’s social district, including Lake Street Eats, Rochefort’s The Next Generation, Tapistry Brewing, China Café, Transient Artisan Ales, and more. There was no intention for the parking lot to remain as a makeshift seating area beyond the time of social distancing requirements, and its simplicity reflected that.

“It had functional, but unattractive cinder block dividers that we obtained for \$60 a piece down the road, which we painted moss green, and four picnic tables and umbrellas,” Ganum said.

In the spring of 2022, Julie Strating, a member of Bridgman’s Corridor Improvement Authority (CIA), brought ideas, concepts, and drawings for taking the project further to a CIA meeting. Her ideas jumpstarted the next phase for the project and inspired the CIA to think bigger.

“Julie has a truly creative gift. She was the driving force behind the transformation of this makeshift seating area that we thought would only last for the duration of the pandemic to support the businesses and the community,” Ganum said.

2023 COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE WINNER



Before & After



Her vision led to the CIA partnering with the The Greater Bridgman Area Chamber and Growth Alliance (CGA) to create a more inviting space for the community. They brought live, local, acoustic music to the space on Sunday afternoons during the summer of 2022 to draw in the community and encourage support of the space by local businesses. Behind the scenes, they continued to think about how to further the evolution of the project and bring in more support.

As the next chapter for the project was beginning to gain momentum, the Bridgman community lost one of the project's earliest supporters: Planning Commission Chairperson Mark Hurray. His wife came to Ganum and explained that she wanted to donate to the project in honor of her late husband. This donation provided momentum for everyone involved with the project to expand their ideas.

"Dedicating the Courtyard to Mark Hurray added a deeply personal and sentimental value to the project. This dedication served as a meaningful way to honor Mark's memory and contributions to the community. It transformed the space into not just a physical location for gatherings and activities, but also a place of remembrance and reflection. Joan, Mark's wife, was involved throughout the project and was there with us, sharing in the joy at the ribbon cutting as well as when we received the Community Excellence Award," Ganum said.

Following the Hurray family's generous support, the project secured additional funding from two grants. These grants would help fund the Courtyard's wooden pergola structure, new concrete, bistro lights, seating options, additional concerts, its mural, and more. The project secured a Public Spaces Community Places grant from the Michigan Development Economic Corporation (MEDC), which is a matching grant program. Bridgman individuals, families, and businesses helped secure and surpass their fundraising goal. The project also received funding through a Bridge Builder's Main Street microgrant from the Michigan Municipal League Foundation, thanks to Julie Strating, who wrote the application.

"From the Bridge Builders microgrant that required online community voting to the MEDC's Public Spaces Community Places, which had over 150 donors, to enjoying concerts every week during the summer, our greater community engagement has been a key part of the Courtyard. When everyone is part of the process (and results), there's a deeper sense of ownership and commitment to the project's success. It's really neat to see all the donor bricks in the space—it's like a patchwork of community support and spirit. Every brick tells a story of someone's contribution, making the whole place feel like it's truly owned by everyone," Ganum said.

The construction of this final phase of the Courtyard was also a community effort. Craftsmen, professionals, and volunteers donated countless hours of their time to complete its final transformation. Together, they brought to life the structural and artistic elements of the space to make it what it is today: a permanent gathering place.

The Bridgman Courtyard project is a testament of what is possible with placemaking efforts in our communities. This project particularly showcases the importance of bringing together the people, businesses, and organizations in a community to share the talents and resources that exist. This applies to communities of every size and need.

"One of the most significant aspects of this project is how much local support there was. Not just in terms of time and talent from the people who volunteered to make it happen, like Julie and several others, but the folks who opened their pocketbook and donated a little bit of money to make it a reality. Receiving the League's Community Excellence Award is a thrilling validation that our small but mighty community's belief in itself can lead to meaningful change," Ganum said.

Ganum encourages communities wanting to do similar projects to take risks and challenge themselves to try things differently than they have always been done. You can learn more about the Bridgman Courtyard project at cea.mml.org.

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