LAKE ST. CLAIR TOURISM INITIATIVE:
Regional Promotion of Hidden Treasure

2014 CONVENTION PREVIEW

MICHIGAN'S BLUE ECONOMY
CHESANING • PETOSKEY • SOUTH HAVEN
The Frankfort Landmarks Art Center is the result of a public/nonprofit partnership that saved an historic landmark, keeping waterfront property in public trust. In addition, it advanced the city of Frankfort’s cultural economic development goals and benefitted the city as a regional hub for the arts, in conjunction with their renovated downtown theater. The regional arts community has two galleries and three classroom spaces for art, music, literature, dance and exercise classes, as well as a professional test kitchen for the culinary arts. The venue is rented for receptions several times a week, and proceeds are used to sustain the art center. The center has increased downtown traffic and business, including to several caterers, lodging establishments, bars, and restaurants.
ORGANIZATION
The Elizabeth Lane Oliver Art Center (a 501(c)3 incorporated in 1981), has been a cultural cornerstone of Benzie County since its founding in 1948. The 12-member board of directors meets monthly for executive committee meetings preceding each monthly board meeting. Staffing consists of a full-time executive director who oversees a part-time associate director and four hourly workers, who together coordinate a multitude of responsibilities, including exhibitions, marketing, sales, facility rentals and maintenance, events, class registration, and instructor coordination. Volunteers are recruited and assigned to specific tasks by a volunteer coordinator. The Center is fortunate to have 35 volunteers to greet visitors, secure galleries, lead tours, staff events, assist in hanging exhibitions, and complete general and administrative tasks.

The Coast Guard Station is now the center’s permanent home. This location was made possible because the city partnered with U.S. Department of the Interior Lands to Parks Program to acquire the property, and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to repurpose it. In addition to the employees and volunteers, the center has 30 instructors, arts patrons, arts students, about 2,500 visiting residents, and about 4,750 out-of-town visitors (2,500 for the art center itself and another 2,250 during rental occasions).

IMPACT
The Arts Center has helped strengthen the community’s volunteer base, building valuable social capital for future projects. Coupled with the theater as an increased cultural draw, the downtown welcomed the recent opening of a brewery and a wine bar. The project highlights the area’s maritime heritage and hopes to catalyze a long-anticipated car-ferry heritage project with neighboring Elberta. As a cultural and recreation destination, increased emphasis is also placed upon the 27-mile Betsie Valley Trail, linking the Traverse Area Recreation and Transportation (TART) network to Grand Rapids via Frankfort.

ACTIONS TAKEN
■ Be Authentic: When reinventing oneself for the new economy, be true to yourself. Repurposing the Coast Guard Station preserved the city’s maritime heritage and complemented the region’s other attractions.

■ Seek Passion: The Arts Center donors and volunteers were committed. The Center was outgrowing its previous location, demonstrating the community’s support and enthusiasm for the arts. The group had the momentum, determination, and creativity necessary to take on the adaptive reuse challenges. The location’s lighting, space, and views also proved motivational. Community residents were supportive of maintaining the property for the public.

■ Seek Experience: Adaptive reuse of historical buildings is challenging. The Arts Center hired an architectural firm specializing in adaptive reuse of historical structures. The firm had experience with the National Parks Service and SHPO and had worked on the local Point Betsie Lighthouse and Petoskey’s Crooked Tree Arts Center projects.

■ Address Funding: While the property was virtually free, the adaptive reuse carried a price tag of $3.3 million. A skillful combination of grant sources was necessary for success. Demonstrated financial support from the community helped to secure the sources, and demonstrated commitment continues to yield grant dollars eight years later. Experience with grant sources and writing is a key component of success.
Build Tenant Sustainability: Fundraising must remain a priority for the organization. Further efforts toward sustainability include the proceeds from the center's rental for group functions and a future gift shop.

Animate the Space: There is frequent traffic at the center for exhibits, events, and classes. The center has more than 30 instructors, so class offerings and attendees are continually changing, creating a buzz in the community. The changing art, the interesting history, and the breathtaking views combine to make the center a successful "third place" people seek to experience again and again. Catered receptions several times a week add to the excitement and regional buzz.

Make the Intangible Tangible: Data can be sexy. Keeping track of the number of events, attendees, and hours can provide tangible evidence as to how much a project like the center contributes to the community as it both utilizes other business services and attracts people who then patronize other businesses. To the extent possible, track correlations directly related to help demonstrate economic value.

LESSONS LEARNED

Be Creative: Don't expect the attorneys to "cut the deal." The attorneys for both the arts center and the city were unable to reach consensus on a position each felt was in the best interests of their client. After many months, the client met without the attorneys, with the best interests of the community as their priority. A solution was achieved in a matter of hours and attorneys instructed to proceed accordingly.

Don't Let Non-Starters Stop You: The city's first identified potential partner was a non-starter. Non-traditional partners may be the solution. The Arts Center proved to be a viable alternative, while also providing significant opportunities for local businesses as a reception venue—including boosting business for several caterers, local florists, local B & Bs, other lodging establishments and bars/restaurants.

Increase Traffic: The Arts Center exhibits, classes, and receptions increase downtown traffic beyond the work day. Flexibility for some non-traditional arts, such as holistic exercise, complements the natural foods store and farmers market. Area businesses are supportive of the arts center and recognize the traffic generated as a tangible contribution to area businesses, creating a symbiotic relationship.

For more information contact Heather Van Poucker, director of information and policy research for the League at 734-669-6326 or hvanpoucker@mml.org. To see a full listing of the League's Case Studies please visit placemaking.mml.org.

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