

PlacePlans: Where Are They Now?

City of Kalamazoo

By Kathy Jennings



Kalamazoo
pop. 74,262



Enjoying good food at Washington Square. Photo courtesy of Fran Dwight.

When the Vietnamese fusion restaurant Pho on the Block opens to customers in Kalamazoo in the spring of 2017, it will be one more sign the effort that has gone into bringing the commercial center of the Edison neighborhood back from years of decline is working. It's also an example of how a focus on quality places and creative civic engagement help a community reach the economic successes for which it is striving.

Through the years, Washington Square has gone from the bustling heart of the neighborhood adjacent to Kalamazoo's downtown to a place where perceived issues with crime and safety halted the will of private developers to invest there. To reverse those attitudes, the Kalamazoo County Land Bank and its partners got to work creating events and attracting new businesses that would slowly turn around the area.

PlacePlans Pilot

That turnaround was boosted by the city's participation in the PlacePlans pilot program, a collaboration between the Michigan Municipal League and Michigan State University. The program, which has grown to include 22 communities following early successes of the pilot group, assists communities as they invest in key public spaces to drive additional economic development and help attract and retain residents and businesses. The Michigan State Housing Development Authority provides funding support.

The process is customized to each project and community, and for Kalamazoo that meant helping the city "connect the dots" or as the action plan described it: "To turn this area from a collection of destinations into an identifiable place that supports downtown and neighborhood viability."

Today a music store, a submarine sandwich shop, and a credit union are part of the new mix of businesses reviving the once-dormant retail hub. Renovated residential offerings above storefronts, a hair salon, a nutrition store, and a home for belly dance are all transforming the block at Washington Square. And the development happening in the surrounding area is equally encouraging.

In 2012, the League offered to help the City of Kalamazoo as it was working out how best to proceed with plans for a regional health and wellness district. Plans called for a district that would encompass a Healthy Living Campus by Kalamazoo Valley Community College, a redeveloped Bank Street Farmers Market, the Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine, the new home for Kalamazoo County clinical mental health services, Disability Network of Southwest Michigan, and Bronson Hospital. Improvements to how the roads were functioning in the area were also under review.

Kalamazoo City Planner Rebekah Kik, who was a consultant when the PlacePlan was being created and then hired by the



city as it was being implemented, says the process helped the community "pull it all together."

The plan that emerged looked at balancing biking, walking, transit, and traffic options in the Edison Neighborhood, and especially at the role of Portage Street as a gateway to the neighborhood and downtown. The plan also considered the role of the farmers' market in the neighborhood, and ways to allow further growth of the market that had outgrown its facilities.

With a common understanding of the need to improve the area's pedestrian friendliness, the leaders of W-Med and KVCC decided to limit parking spaces. "KVCC could have put in 600 spaces instead of 120," Kik says.

When it comes to fostering a culture that allows for lots of transportation options, both Bronson Hospital and KVCC are onboard, she continued. "It's a culture shift."

Bringing The PlacePlan To Life

As planning turned to implementation, the League awarded a follow-up grant in 2015 to build-out a prep kitchen in a previously-vacant commercial building owned by the Land Bank at the corner of Portage Street and Washington Avenue. The site, a five-minute walk from the market, allows for code-compliant on-site food preparation that will support food-based business development.

In late 2015, Kalamazoo pursued some of the major recommended changes on a trial basis. Portage Street was resurfaced and restriped to three lanes with a bike lane, and traffic signal timings were modified to compensate for the new traffic pattern. Those changes are scheduled to become permanent in 2017 since the street no longer needs to accommodate 24,000 cars a day. In 2019, Portage Street will be reconstructed to expand sidewalks and create improved pedestrian infrastructure.



1. The new home of Pho on the Block, 1301 Portage St. Photo courtesy of Kalamazoo County Land Bank. 2. Enjoying refreshments during Art Hop. Photo courtesy of Kalamazoo County Land Bank. 3. Art on display at Washington Square during Art Hop. Photo courtesy of Fran Dwight.

More than \$200,000 from seven different funders was invested in the renovation of the space at 1301 Portage St., on the corner of Washington Avenue, where Pho on the Block will be located. The restaurant will fill the last empty retail space on the block on the east side of Portage Street.

Putting The Focus On People

But Kelly Clarke, executive director of the Kalamazoo County Land Bank, says the work has never been solely about 1301 Portage Street. “It’s about the people. Not the building. We’re working with the Edison neighborhood to create a place where people can shop, and play, and learn. That’s our intent. This is not about getting tenants for the sake of getting tenants.”

If it were, the neighborhood might be changing a lot faster than it has been, but with less community buy-in. At neighborhood special events over the past three years, residents and attendees provided referrals and ideas, participated in art installation projects, purchased goods from vendors and took in performances—all part of building goodwill in Edison. Instead of moving quickly, the Land Bank has worked to include the neighborhood in decisions as it tries to ensure the proposed new developments are inclusive and supportive of the mixed income and racially diverse urban neighborhood.

The changes coming to Washington Square are intended to celebrate the many cultures of the neighborhood and what they have in common. Events at Washington Square have featured African dance, Middle Eastern dance, and even a Scottish bagpiper. At the December Art Hop, participants in the Zumba class had a dance-off with the young people from the Boys and Girls Club, making for what Clarke describes as a joyful evening of celebration where people were “making cross-cultural connections.”

That kind of approach helped when it came time to judge the participants in the Fare Games competition. The Edison residents were some of the most excited about being able to offer something different, having an opportunity to experience another cultural cuisine, and to interact with another business that represents the multiculturalism that has been celebrated here,” Clarke says.

The Fare Games competition was as much about engaging the community and generating excitement as it was about identifying a food-based business for a vacant and underutilized space, says Clarke. Food-based entrepreneurs were invited to compete for the opportunity to start or relocate their business to the space. The prize package includes a three-year lease that starts out low and gradually increases, and business services worth more than \$30,000.

The winners, Reggie Kaur and Nancy Tien, are currently working with Miller-Davis Company to customize the space to fit their needs. The 1,300-square foot space will be turned into a restaurant that seats 42.

It was a hard decision,” says Fare Games committee chair Becky Fulgoni, “but the committee was unanimous in its praise for Pho on the Block’s vision for the space, the strength of their business plan, and, of course, the deliciousness of the food we sampled.”

Placemaking—the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, and learn—is working in Kalamazoo.

For more information on the League’s PlacePlans program, please visit placemaking.mml.org.

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