



BLUFFTON NOW! 2020 ANNUAL REPORT



January 1, 2021

Dear Downtown Revitalization Partner,

Bluffton NOW! is your dedicated downtown revitalization non-profit. As a local non-profit, we have been focused on community awareness and tangible results. Bluffton NOW! Board of Directors is composed of downtown business owners, downtown building owners, government officials, and concerned citizens who are invested in making downtown Bluffton into a destination for years to come.

As a local non-profit, we function based on how others feel about our vision for the future and have a track record regarding downtown revitalization. Bluffton NOW! has worked hard to change the culture of downtown, increase private investment in downtown, and help our local downtown businesses grow and thrive. This year despite all its setbacks has been a successful year for downtown Bluffton.

I am pleased to present the Bluffton NOW! Annual Report for 2020. Please review the report and let me know if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Michael W. Lautzenheiser, Jr.
Bluffton NOW! President.

Bluffton NOW! Annual Report 2020

Introduction

This year will go in the books as the year of hidden gems. The black cloud of COVID-19 covered our community, but it did not stop several bright spots from happening in downtown Bluffton. In this report, I will go over many of these hidden gems along with some things that were not able to go forward as planned.

Staff

This year we added our first part-time staff to help run the Parlor City Market as well as to help with other downtown events and Bluffton NOW! activities. Audry Estill has been a great member of the team and we are looking forward to continuing this into 2021. The success of Parlor City Market and the Downtown Art and Music Festival would not have been possible without having staffing in place.

Executive Committee

Michael Lautzenheiser, Jr. served this year as the president of Bluffton NOW!. John Stauffer served this year as the vice-president. Nick Huffman served this year as treasurer. Jeremy Penrod served this year as secretary.

Board of Directors

Kim Leas - Achieva Salon, Bob Thompson - Concerned Citizen,
Bruce Golder - Concerned Citizen, Joy Addington - Bijou Gift Boutique,
Lannette Bickel - Concerned Citizen, Cory Mann - Concerned Citizen,
Seth Sailors - Concerned Citizen, Allysa Gerber - Concerned Citizen,
Mike Downey - Concerned Citizen, Yvette Huggins - Concerned Citizen,
Conor Jackson - Jackson's Construction, Janella Stronczek - Bluffton Common Council,
Ted Smith - Bluffton Building Department,
Pam Vanderkolk / Brandy Fiechter - Bluffton Parks Department,
Blake Gerber - Wells County Commissioners, Seth Whicker - Wells County Council,
Doug Brown - Bluffton News-Banner, Tammy Slater - Wells County Foundation
Sarah MacNeill - Wells County Library, Erin Prible - Wells County Chamber of Commerce,
Chad Kline - Wells County Economic Development

Fundraising

This year we were able to fundraise through the 3rd Annual Brrr Fest, a Downtown Mini Dinner, and general contributions of \$67,000 to help cover project and operating costs. This is a testament to our group's ability to pivot and adapt on the run to make the best of the situations at hand. This exceeded our \$50,000 fundraising goal for the year. However, we were not able to have a full-sized annual dinner and we missed out on the Ford Drive 4 Your Community fundraiser opportunity due to COVID-19 restrictions and complications.

Parlor City Plaza

The Parlor City Plaza hosted several amazing events this year despite all of the issues regarding COVID-19. It started with 3 virtual events including a community prayer vigil, a live country concert from Trevor Hunt, and a live folk/country concert from Bob Thompson. We did lose out after having a cancellation on having the Ford Drive 4 Your Community event at the plaza. The summer-long Parlor City Market started with just a small handful of vendors and ended the year with a long vendors waiting list. The Parlor City Markets effect on downtown was exactly what our community was looking for. Hundreds of people were attracted to downtown every Saturday. This directly correlated to a pick up in foot traffic and business at our local downtown businesses. The next successful activity was the Thomas "Toga" Garza concert that attracted several people including a large number of high school-aged kids to the downtown area for a great time. The plaza Woodstock party was next on the plaza. We had a fun time giving back to the community and having a party on the plaza in the midst of a busy day with a car show and Kehoe concert. The next event was an amazing 2-day festival of live music and local food with the Downtown Bluffton Mural and Music Fest. The event wrapped up the Parlor City Market season and drew attention to the wonderful artwork being installed in our downtown. This event also drew hundreds of people into the downtown. The events for 2020 wrapped up with our annual Chili Walk in October which was an excellent resurgence year for the event after last year's rainout. All in all, while we would have liked to do more we did have an excellent first year for the Parlor City Plaza.

Marketing

We as an organization adopted our first official digital marketing plan and have begun to implement it. We have reached 100s of people through our website this year (www.blufftonnow.org) We have 3,663 Facebook page likes and growing. We have 723 followers on Instagram. As well as 233 followers on Twitter. We also utilized temporary signage, mailers, and printed flyers to help market events and activities throughout the year.

Downtown Improvements

This year we were able to add 2 amazing murals downtown. One from local artist Nancy Wagner and the other from national artist David Rice. We were also able to make some safety improvements to the downtown sidewalks and remove the trees that were causing damage to the sidewalks and buildings.

Plans and Studies

We were able to kick off the process of looking into the future for downtown by completing the downtown parking study and starting the master streetscape plan. Keeping the ball rolling will allow us to do meaningful improvements to downtown over a period of years that will end with a cohesive planned out city center.

Community Re-Investment Program

The Community Re-Investment Program had its biggest year in 2020. The \$150,000 in matching funds made available by the City of Bluffton have attracted over \$573,000 in private investment into our downtown. Due to the size and complexity of some of these projects, the construction window will bleed into 2021, but all but 2 of the originally approved projects are moving forward. This program is doing the heavy lifting that is necessary to have a thriving downtown. It is only possible if the buildings in downtown are in good enough shape and can be utilized. The investments being made through this program are creating enough interest that other non funded projects are being done in downtown as well. This makes the \$573,000 number not the full picture of the amount of investment occurring downtown. We are excited to build on this year's successes next year. See attached CRP progress table for more details on the program.

Historic Designation

Downtown Bluffton has been recently added to the historic register. This allows many downtown buildings to be able to apply for historic preservation fundings through the State of Indiana. This will open up opportunities for larger-scale improvement projects to occur downtown. It also will help further reduce the cost of entry for someone who wants to invest or start a business downtown.

Small Business Grants

We were able to play a role in helping to get small business grants to assist our local small businesses across so that they would be able to make up for lost sales and income due to the COVID-19 restrictions and shutdowns. The grant Wells County received was for \$50,0000. We also helped send out information on other grant funds that were available from private sources as well. We are looking into applying for future funds and providing other grant resources to help our downtown businesses throughout next year.

Small Business Holiday Shopping

In terms of importance to our local small retail businesses downtown getting this right this year was of the utmost importance. We were able to do 2 separate shopping day events that brought 10s of thousands of dollars into the participating businesses. While the number of shoppers was down and we had some businesses opt not to participate due to COVID-19 the two days were successful to the point that it gave our businesses peace of mind that the holiday shopping season that they so greatly depend on was actually going to happen this year.

Engage and Retain our Youth

This year was a down year for normally top-notch youth involvement activities. With COVID-19 restrictions we had to postpone most of our efforts. However, we are starting to talk with local art teachers to see if there is a way to have our local youth design art and sculptures for downtown. We also had success this year with having a high school student do a concert at the Parlor City Plaza which attracted several of our youth into downtown for an event. The Parlor City Market and other downtown events has also begun to make downtown a better place for youth attraction.

Downtown Occupancy

Downtown Occupancy								
Floor	Total	%	Occupied (sq/ft)	%	Partially Occupied (sq/ft)	%	Vacant (sq/ft)	%
1st (2019)	495,627	100%	446,360	90.1%	22,216	4.5%	27,051	5.5%
1st (2020)	495,627	100%	449,278	90.6%	17,207	3.5%	29,142	5.9%
2nd (2019)	324,208	100%	206,909	63.8%			117,299	36.2%
2nd (2020)	324,208	100%	216,866	66.9%			107,342	33.1%
3rd (2019)	90,582	100%	62,003	68.4%			28,579	31.6%
3rd (2020)	90,582	100%	62,003	69.2%			27,922	30.8%

Support Potential Business Ventures

We are excited to be part of this every year. We are excited that this year brought about the opening of the Parlor City Brewery, Pitroad Collectibles, Thrush Artworks, and Balanced Chiropractic in downtown Bluffton. We are also extremely excited about Hugh's Bakery & Coffeehouse's move into their new downtown location on W. Market Street. We also were able to be part of the announcements that Kayla's Cupcakes and Toppings will be opening downtown soon. Unfortunately, we lost Main Street Clinic, Olde 303 Music and Addictions Body Art from downtown due to various reasons. We see this as a key piece of downtown's success and hope to continue to see more announcements next year.

Work With Empty or Underutilized Building Owners

Each year we hope to find more building owners that are interested in redeveloping our historic downtown buildings. This year we had some significant success highlighted by the new ownership of the building that Bijou is located in which is spearheading the opening of Toppings and future redevelopment of the upstairs area of that great building. We are also excited that the new ownership of 107 E Market St. was able to keep another building downtown from being demolished. This investment will end up creating a new downtown attracting future commercial and residential tenants. Hugh's Bakery & Coffeehouse also brought a struggling building back to life. As buildings come up for sale we will be able to help provide more assistance in the future with potential CRP funds and now the newly available historic preservation grants.

Conclusion

The year 2020 is certainly one to put in the books and to learn from. If Bluffton NOW! can be successful in 2020 then we have a much better chance of being successful in future years. Looking back there were more positive things than negative things going on downtown. With 2020 in the books the future is even brighter for downtown Bluffton.