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Bill Bresler, Plymouth Observer



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DOWNTOWN PLYMOUTH:

NOT JUST A WALK IN THE PARK



Downtown Plymouth's picturesque town square has drawn residents, businesses, and visitors for years. Host to a diverse mix of retail shops, restaurants, and more than 100 annual special events, the downtown has also been featured in two major motion pictures and numerous commercials generating significant community buzz and pedestrian traffic for businesses. Behind the scenes, the city of Plymouth and its Downtown Development Authority (DDA) share a long history of working together to create, maintain, and promote their downtown as a destination.

CREATING A GATHERING PLACE

In the 1990s, the city and its DDA implemented a major streetscape project to set the stage for growth and to encourage businesses to locate downtown. Taking its cue from the popularity of Kellogg Park, a green space located in the center of downtown that features mature shade trees and a fountain, the streetscape was intended to spread the park's attributes through the rest of the downtown. Just as Kellogg Park was recognized as a natural gathering place for local residents and events, the intent was to promote downtown Plymouth as a gathering place for the southeast Michigan region.

"We want people to think of our downtown as a fun place to spend their free time," says City Manager Paul Sincock. "Events like our summer concert series in Kellogg Park have become part of many families' afternoons and evenings."

The number one priority was to make residents and visitors feel comfortable and safe. Improving the area's walkability was key. A median was installed in Main Street to provide a mid-block crossing and calm traffic through the corridor. Bump-outs were added to extend the sidewalk area and improve visibility at intersection corners, and brick paver crosswalks were installed to better define crossings and improve aesthetics.

Landscaping elements such as trees and planter boxes were added to expand the green space of Kellogg Park throughout the downtown. The green additions were strategically placed to help buffer the hard infrastructure of downtown like road entryways and parking areas. Replacement of utility poles with decorative lighting provided the finishing touches to the downtown's historic charm.

The growth and economic development that followed affirmed Plymouth's strategic efforts. New businesses and restaurants moved into the downtown, diversifying the former retail-dominated mix and extending downtown activities well into the night. Annual special events like Art in the Park and the Plymouth Ice Festival, grew beyond their traditional limits of Kellogg Park to other downtown areas increasing exposure for other businesses. Families flocked to the community's quiet neighborhoods and lively downtown, slowly changing the residential mix.

Nearly 20 years later, the city and its DDA are focused on protecting their initial investment. A multi-year streetscape, utility, and safety improvement program was planned and designed by Wade Trim to encourage people to explore more of the downtown area on foot and reinforce the city's placemaking elements. In 2010, the asphalt intersection of Main Street and Ann Arbor Trail was rehabilitated to concrete and other upgrades were made within the corridor. The project recently received a Michigan Concrete Association Award of Excellence for the use of decorative concrete.

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

Pedestrian safety remains at the forefront of the downtown area's functionality. Brick crosswalks were widened to standard widths and realigned to give pedestrians a more consistent visual line of sight for street crossings. Countdown crosswalk signals were installed to make pedestrians aware of the time remaining for a safe crossing, and truncated dome ramps were added to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

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"Details matter a great deal to us. We took this opportunity to refresh what is great about our downtown and improve the things that could be better," says Paul Sincoc. "Some of the bricks had settled unevenly and there were cracks in the concrete. When it comes to safety, we are proudest of the things you don't notice."

Changing the main downtown intersection to concrete will lower maintenance needs and enhance aesthetics. Because the city and DDA were jointly involved from the planning stages of this project, the intersection improvements also provided the opportunity for the city to improve underground water main and storm sewer utilities.

AESTHETIC IMPROVEMENTS

In addition, a decorative "compass" feature was installed in the intersection to serve as a new downtown landmark. The relatively inexpensive element is normally just part of the roadway but it takes center stage when downtown streets are closed during special events like the Memorial Day Parade and Green Street Fair. It is a new piece of Plymouth's identity that helps differentiate it from other area communities.

Aesthetic improvements merged with sustainability when traditional span wire traffic signals were replaced with LED mast arm signals. LED technology reduces operating costs while looking good; the mast arm signal poles match the existing downtown street light poles. A backup battery system with a generator hook up was also added to the lights to maintain traffic if electrical power is lost.

Construction of improvements will continue in 2011 at the intersection of Main Street and Penniman Road. Similar in nature, the improvements will extend the corridor's safety, functionality, and aesthetics.

The success of this project can be attributed, in part, to the willingness of the city of Plymouth and its DDA to work together. They implement projects efficiently by minimizing duplication of efforts, developing cohesive project plans, and allowing members of each group to voice ideas and concerns early. Determinations are also made about whose funds should be used for which improvements. They consider themselves partners who try to do what's right for the city. While what's right is not always the same answer for residents, business owners and visitors, downtown improvements are one common thread that continues to tie all. 

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