PROJECT SCOPE:

The Challenge:
Downtown St. Joseph in the late 1990s and early 2000s had a 33-percent vacancy rate among its storefronts. Despite its location on beautiful Lake Michigan and a pleasant and walkable business district, it was not considered a destination point by outsiders. Even St. Joseph residents would leave the city to shop in big box stores and malls located in the outlying areas.

Overview:
Taking inspiration from the CowParade art event in Chicago, a group of city leaders and concerned residents came up with the St. Joseph Public Art project to re-energize the community by capitalizing on the artistic talent that existed in the area. The Public Art effort is a multi-phase, community-driven initiative designed to make the Victorian downtown a destination point for tourists, visitors, and potential residents and businesses. A theme is selected each year and large molds are picked from a huge warehouse near Chicago to coincide with the theme. Then area artists submit proposals about how they would like to decorate the pieces created from the molds. Artists are paid a small stipend by business, corporate, and individual sponsors. Starting with a public unveiling ceremony held each year in mid-May, upward of 30 pieces of art of varying objects are located in the downtown district throughout the year.

PROJECT DETAILS:

NAME: St. Joseph Public Art

PROJECT START DATE: Summer 2004

LOCATION: St. Joseph, Michigan

THE GIST:
The city of St. Joseph Public Art project fills downtown with unique sculptures from the area’s artists and has helped turn the west Michigan lake community into a tourist destination.
summer. Past themes included Horses on the Beach; Beach Bears; Hot Cars Cool Beaches; Beached Pirates; Barnyard at the Beach; and Surf ‘n Safari. The art project runs annually from May through September.

The art sculptures are in and of itself an attraction, but city leaders also added regular activities, festivals, and programs to keep the downtown active and lively throughout the year. To make the public art interactive, people are encouraged to touch the sculptures, take photographs, and find each piece of art located on the sidewalks throughout the downtown. Thousands of colorful brochures are handed out containing a map of the downtown showing the location and sponsor of each sculpture. While viewing the art, people can even use their cellphones to learn more as each piece of art is assigned a phone number that plays a pre-recorded audio story about the sculpture and artist who created it. There’s also a website (www.st-josephpublicart.com) that has details on the art pieces and artists. At the end of the season, the art pieces go up for sale in a public auction with proceeds going back to the art project. One of the first-of-its-kind in Michigan, project leaders now receive regular inquiries from community officials throughout the state and nation looking to learn from and duplicate what is happening in St. Joseph.

Accomplishments:
► Located 90 miles from Chicago, St. Joseph Public Art has helped turn the city from one that tourists drive by into a community where they will stop, dine, and stay.
► Helped increase downtown storefront occupancy rate from 67 percent in 2004, to now consistently around 100 percent.
► Dramatically increased foot traffic in downtown, which resulted in new businesses opening and increased success of existing businesses.
► Largely contributed to a change in attitude among local residents who didn’t want St. Joseph to become a “tourist town.” Residents now see the value and benefits of being a community for vacationers and second-home buyers from the Chicago area.
Contributed tremendously toward the city becoming a welcoming destination for families and family fun.

Some say the success of the art project was a catalyst to other related economic development efforts, including a downtown beautification movement, numerous festivals taking place throughout the year, and eventually the further development of the Silver Lake Beach, which includes the Silver Beach Carousel, Silver Beach Amusement Park Museum, Shadowland on Silver Beach ballroom, Curious Kids’ Discovery Zone, and the Whirlpool Compass Fountain.

The 2014 theme is Shining Sculptures – Lighting Up St. Joseph! Sculpture molds to represent the two lighthouses that exist at St. Joseph’s Silver Beach were specially created for the 2014 project. The art project theme is being used to help promote the $2 million fundraising campaign underway to restore the city’s two historic lighthouses. Proceeds from the 2014 art auction will go to the restoration effort.

Voted the statewide 2007 Michigan Municipal League Community Excellence Award winner for outstanding, innovative community project.

One downtown hotel manager reports that occupancy rates at the business have increased 25 percent annually in the last six years largely due to the increase in tourism traffic coming to see the art and other attractions, activities, and festivals.

Helped diversify retail business downtown.

Helped stabilize residential property values.

Helped stabilize local population trends. The city’s population was 8,789 in 2004 when the art project began and is now 8,365. Officials say the decline of just 424 residents would have been much worse had it not been for the art project and related efforts that attract people to the community.

Participation:
Who were the key participants in creating and sustaining the project?
- City of St. Joseph, led by Susan Solon, director of communications and marketing
- St. Joseph Improvement Association
- Abonmarche Consultants
- St. Joseph Today
- Berrien Artist Guild
- Southwestern Michigan Tourist Council
- Cornerstone Alliance
- Pizza Hut Wings Street
- Police department—use walking police reserves in the summer to keep an eye on the art.
- Individual participating artists
- Numerous sponsors
- Visitors

Budget:
- $100,000 annual budget to cover city staff and the use of a public relations firm to handle marketing and promotion.
- Thousands of dollars in annual donations from local corporations, organizations, businesses, and individuals.
Funding:
Where did the funding come from? How is it sustained?
• A majority of it came from the city of St. Joseph and the St. Joseph Improvement Association, but there were also substantial contributions from the local business community, and other area nonprofit organizations and individuals.

How-to:

1) DESIGNATE A GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL TO LEAD THE PROJECT.
   In St. Joseph, that person is Susan Solon, director of communications and marketing. Solon is a full-time employee for the city.

2) MARKET IT EXTENSIVELY.
   They distributed 25,000 brochures in a number of welcome centers in the area. Brochures include a map of the downtown showing the location of each art piece; the maps can also be used for a walking tour. They annually purchase billboards and print media advertisements to promote the art and related events. They also receive multiple news stories from the area media about each year’s theme and related events.

3) FORM A CREATIVE BRAND.
   Each year’s art theme is different and is typically tied to a community asset, such as the carousel, beach and water. Each year, St. Joseph creates a logo around the theme and shares it freely with the local businesses that then create and sell related merchandise such as t-shirts, baby clothes, puzzles, Frisbees, cards, etc.

4) TAKE CARE OF YOUR ARTIST, MAKE THEM FEEL APPRECIATED.
   In St. Joseph, each artist receives a gift bag, and on the opening night of the art unveiling, business sponsor Abonmarche donates artist appreciation bucks that those attending the unveiling can use on merchandise and food purchased at downtown businesses.
5) **DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH THE ART PIECES ONCE THE DISPLAY IS OVER.**

St. Joseph auctions them off with some bids as high as $4,500, but admittedly some are very weathered and in poor condition by seasons’ end and are gifted away. Many pieces from years past can be found in local businesses that purchased them. A former mayor has one in the front hallway of his home. An area police detective has one of the pirates on a dock at his house.

**Lessons Learned:**

- **Keep it simple.**
  The first two years they did 53 sculptures of carousel horses and they quickly realized that was way too many. They now do about half that number each year.

- **Make the art interactive and fun.**
  The first year they thought the art was so beautifully done that they feared people would damage the pieces. So they put “keep off” signs and little fences on each piece. This resulted in many complaints and angry letters to the local newspaper. Now the art is meant to be interactive and can be sat on, climbed on, and touched. The unofficial motto is “Enjoy it, touch it, but don’t kick it or jump off it.”

- **Get sponsors and community buy-in.**
  Attaining sponsors the first year is difficult because of the uncertainty of the project and what it is all about. Sponsorships come much easier once people see the value and the tremendous amount of foot traffic generated to the downtown.

- **Honor your sponsors.**
  Include the sponsors’ names and give them recognition in as many areas as possible.

- **Pay the artists.**
  Artists were paid $100 in that first year for their supplies, but that stipend to cover the cost of materials has been steadily increased over the years and they’re now paid $500. Some sponsors pay their artists more.
Get professional help where needed. With limited design and marketing skills in-house, the city eventually contracted with a public relations firm to do the promotional materials and marketing efforts for the Public Art and other community activities.

No ostriches! Ostriches were one of the sculptures in the 2009 Surf ‘n Safari theme and their legs and necks were too skinny and sometimes broke.

Nail ‘em down. Be sure to bolt the art sculptures to the ground otherwise high winds will take their toll.

Make it easy for visitors. This year’s art project also serves a dual purpose to raise awareness of the effort to raise money to restore the two St. Joseph lighthouses. QR codes (a type of bar code for mobile devices) are located near the art pieces that people can scan from their phones and donate to the restoration effort right from the street.

No clothes. Putting art pieces in clothing is not advised because the weather over the season tends to damage them.

Now what? The Art Project has achieved all the goals organizers originally had. Now city leaders admit the project is at a crossroads. Leaders need to decide if they should end it after 2014, continue it as is, or have it evolve into something different. Dozens of on-street interviews of residents and business operators found a desire to continue the art project for years to come.

Similar Projects:
- Chicago, Illinois; CowParade: http://www.cowparade.com/
- Naperville, Illinois; Century Walk: http://centurywalk.org/index.cfm
- Racine, Wisconsin; Public Art: http://www.racinedowntown.com/publicart.html
- Scottsdale, Arizona; Public Art: http://www.scottsdalepublicart.org/about/
- Denver, Colorado; Public Art: http://artsandvenuesdenver.com/public-art
- Minneapolis, Minnesota; Midtown Greenway Public Art: http://midtowngreenway.org/projects-and-programs/public-art/

Documents:
Project documents, information sheets, guidelines, promotional materials, etc. that could be helpful.
- Official website: www.stjosephpublicart.com
- City website art project page: http://www.sjcity.com/play-here/public-art-project
- About the project: http://www.stjosephpublicart.com/about-project
- Previous art projects: http://www.stjosephpublicart.com/previous-projects

Experts:
Susan Solon, director of communications and marketing, city of St. Joseph, solon@sjcity.com
The Center for 21st Century Communities

Building 21st century communities

Experts from around the world—in academic, business, and public sectors alike—agree that investing in communities is a critical element to long-term economic development in the 21st century. Michigan's future depends on its ability to attract and retain knowledge-based workers. Central to attracting this priceless commodity is place. Research proves that successful 21st century communities effectively leverage the assets summarized in this brochure. Learn more and stay engaged at mml.org.

Who we are...

The Michigan Municipal League is the one clear voice for Michigan communities. We are a nonprofit, but we act with the fervor of entrepreneurs; our people are dynamic, energetic, and highly approachable, passionately and aggressively pushing change to achieve better communities and a better Michigan.

What we know...

Never before have so many diverse interests, from academic researchers to the business community to government leaders, shared a single conclusion: Michigan’s future depends on its ability to attract knowledge-based workers. And what is central to attracting this priceless commodity? Place, specifically vibrant 21st century communities.

What we offer...

Through its Center for 21st Century Communities (21c3), the League provides education, technical assistance, public outreach, and unprecedented access to experts and resources. The 21c3 is a “one-stop-shop” for communities interested in creating and sustaining livable, desirable, and unique places that attract the highly skilled, creative, and talented workforce of the next century.