City of Jackson

By Luke Forrest

Positive transformations are complex and time-consuming, so change did not happen overnight in each city that participated in the PlacePlans program. But almost five years after launching the program, we are seeing the fruits of our collective labor. This issue marks the launch of a new series for 2017: PlacePlans: Where Are They Now? We will examine the progress in the PlacePlans cities, with a particular eye on the lessons learned that can apply to communities everywhere.

PlacePlans was a demonstration and technical assistance program developed in 2012 under the auspices of the statewide MIPalce Partnership, with lead sponsorship from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. The program was focused on assisting cities, selected through a competitive process, with the development of visionary yet realistic strategies to redevelop a key walkable, mixed-use area of their community. The League, along with faculty and students from Michigan State University School of Planning, Design and Construction and MSU Extension, worked with community leaders, residents, anchor institutions, and expert consultants to bring the best practices in placemaking and civic engagement to bear in a customized way for each of the 22 participating cities.

The program partners developed PlacePlans with multiple goals:

- Help individual communities achieve greater economic success through placemaking projects
- Test some of the placemaking innovations and different approaches that were cropping up around the nation and the world
- Identify key themes and lessons that lead to success or failure in communities big and small

Jackson: Downtown Alleyway PlacePlan

We begin with a focus on downtown Jackson, where a project that started with a single underappreciated alley has grown into a district-wide ball of momentum. Staff from the City of Jackson approached the PlacePlans team in late 2013 looking for assistance with redesigning an alley cutting through downtown. The alley was under the radar for many of those who frequented downtown, but the city identified it as a priority due to its potential to better connect several key sites: the public transit center, Michigan Avenue businesses, the farmers market, the Grand River, and Grand River Brewery, a new business that was quickly becoming a magnet for activity.

The MSU faculty and student team took the lead on engaging the community through a design charrette process to identify creative options for the alley in early 2014. This engagement process revealed that the community had its eye on a much broader transformation to attract new businesses and residents to the entire downtown. The city, led by City Manager Patrick Burtch, decided it needed to invest more significantly in downtown public space and infrastructure, so it engaged Beckett & Raeder, Inc. (BRI) to develop a comprehensive streetscape plan for Michigan Avenue and adjacent side streets. The entire process was ultimately branded “Dig Jackson.” The city council set aside $3.5 million to fund the infrastructure improvements, and the construction phase of Dig Jackson began in late summer 2014.

Soon thereafter, a number of major businesses and other institutions in Jackson launched the Jackson Anchor Initiative to organize and coordinate their investments in downtown, as well as to attract additional investment. In the vision
shared by the Anchor Initiative leaders and city officials, Dig Jackson was not the end, but the beginning. The ultimate goals were redevelopment of vacant historic buildings and blighted parcels, creating an environment for more downtown residents and businesses. Beginning in 2015, that vision has come together more quickly than many expected as evidenced by:

- Five new restaurants have followed Grand River Brewery’s lead and opened in downtown, including Dirty Bird, which opens onto the revitalized downtown alley as envisioned in the PlacePlan
- Home Renewal Systems announced plans to renovate the historic Hayes Hotel, vacant since 2003, to house a mixture of hotel, residential, office and commercial uses
- Three other development teams have announced mixed-use housing developments, including Lofts on Louis, which will fill in a vacant block on Louis Glick Highway
- Glick Highway will be converted into a more pedestrian-friendly two-way street
- The Jackson Art Commission coordinated the expansion of Horace Blackman Park and development of a new public space, CP Federal City Square, which was funded by state, federal and philanthropic grants.

Lessons from Jackson

While every city is unique, many core principles of place-based redevelopment port well from one community to the next. Jackson’s experience highlights the following lessons that apply broadly:

1. Prioritize investment areas as a community and stick to that vision

City Manager Patrick Burtch credits the Jackson City Council with coming to a consensus several years ago that investing in downtown, the city’s core, is the top priority. Burtch equates downtown with the “nucleus of the cell” and says that “the cell dies without it.” Investing public dollars always comes with public relations hits, says Burtch, but your elected and appointed officials must “be willing to stay on that path, because you have to spend money to make money.”

2. Public space investments create positive momentum and catalyze large private investments

John Burtka, president of Grand River Brewery and partner in several of the ongoing downtown developments, cites the Dig Jackson investments as the crucial launching pad because it told the world, “Hey, we’re serious!” Burtch and Burtka agree those investments changed the mindset of the private sector about Jackson.

3. Visuals are crucial inspirational tools

Pushed by Burtch, the Beckett & Raeder team developed design renderings for Dig Jackson that went far beyond the bounds of normal streetscape improvements, into master planning and the beginnings of a form-based zoning approach. Burtch says those plans have been invaluable in convincing skeptical community leaders and investors to participate. “3D architectural renderings provide a vision that is not always easily understood by those that are typically acting in differing disciplines,” he says.

4. Engage anchor institutions, even those not located in the priority geographic area

The Jackson Anchor Initiative is an excellent case study on the power of getting important institutions rallied behind, and often leading, the community’s vision. In Jackson’s case, it has led to significant investments in downtown from institutions that are not even located there. According to Dr. Burtch, “the Anchor Initiative provides a significant measure of political coverage for a city council that must make decisions regarding public investment in the urban core that are easily misunderstood.”

5. Communicate through every medium possible

The city engaged the University of Michigan’s Citizen Interaction Design program to develop an excellent set of communication tools about the Dig Jackson project (see examples at digjackson.com), helping community leaders to allay fears about the disruption and costs associated with construction.

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