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HONOR: WHEN IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO SAVE A VILLAGE

By AMY LANE

A little over a decade ago, a couple dozen people gathered for conversation in the village of Honor's neighborhood park.

The talk: The state of affairs in the once-thriving Benzie County community, and what was needed for Honor to again prosper.

It was the start of citizen-led progress, and promise.

Out of that first meeting arose the Honor Area Restoration Project or HARP, a nonprofit established by community members to revitalize an area with vacant downtown buildings, limited tax base and economic activity, and a shining asset barely visible to those passing through -- the Platte River.

"One of the first things that we did, we organized a community meeting in what was then the Platte River Elementary School in Honor," said HARP President Ingemar Johansson. "We were pleased to see there were about 150 people in that room. Just the sheer amount of people that showed interest in this, spurred us on."

Supported by the village and HARP and assisted by the Alliance for Economic Success and a grant from Rotary Charities of Traverse City, the EnVision Honor community workshop identified barriers to revitalization, why revitalization was important, and participants' vision for Honor in ten years' time. In the picture that emerged: Attractive streetscapes and a vibrant downtown; new and varied businesses that could support the community and create jobs; and a focus on the river and natural resources access.

Johansson said the conclusion was clear. "We have to highlight the river. If we want to bring economic activity into the area, we have to give people a reason to stop."

From there, work began. Consultants Beckett & Raeder Inc., who facilitated the EnVision workshop, drew up a community

revitalization strategy made possible by the \$5,000 Rotary Charities grant. That grant, the first of many to flow to the volunteer effort, was critical for the money and more.

"We did not have \$5,000 to put toward professionals," Johansson said. "That was huge, not only the money, but also to have Rotary behind us, be fans of the project. And that led others to sign on."

Fast forward to 2021, and see change. New business owners have come to downtown, a vacant, blighted building on Honor's main street has been demolished with a small housing development rising in its place, and just outside of town along US-31 sits a sign announcing the biggest project unfolding: the 52-acre future Platte River Park.

The park, containing more than 1,500 feet of pristine Platte River frontage and a rich diversity of habitats, from wetlands and swamp to forest and fields and a large blueberry farm, promises a variety of recreational opportunities including



The Beautiful Platte River, Honor, Michigan

fishing, boating, hiking, cross country skiing, access to various ecosystems and habitats, bird watching and picnicking.

PARTICIPATION AND PERSISTENCE

It's an ambitious undertaking that's coming about through participation and persistence by many, not the least of which is HARP, which has worked over the years to bring interested parties together to address Honor area problems and build off assets. Forging partnerships with community members, area organizations and philanthropic interests, HARP has championed revitalization and has been a nonprofit catalyst and convener. It's an important role, said Josh Stoltz, executive director of local nonprofit organization Grow Benzie, one of many to offer thoughts and ideas to HARP.

"When it comes to small towns, it's hard to think bigger. It's hard to think outside of our small neighborhood and small communities," Stoltz said. "It's inspiring to know that a group of locals have the vision, and time...to do the work. A lot of people start and have the enthusiasm to get something done, and it dies off over a year or two.

"Their initiative I think is a good illustration for other villages in our county to know that things can get done on a local level."

HARP's advocacy has helped moved forward visions of a walkable, bikeable community, with a paved sidewalk that's been built along and beyond the front of the Honor Plaza

Downtown, there's the elimination of the "question mark" building, a vacant structure in disrepair and emblazoned with a giant question mark on its front. The land reverted to the Benzie County Land Bank Authority which sought development, and HomeStretch Nonprofit Housing Corp. in Traverse City is now building eight townhouses on the site – "a big step forward," said village council member Bill Ward. "Housing is a critical need all over our area," said Ward, former village president and a HARP board member. The townhouses mean "new people living in our community" and possibly workers for local businesses in need, he said.

Ward helped guide community improvements including street paving and converting street lights to money-saving LED lights.

BUSINESSES, BOTH NEW AND IMPROVED

Another new downtown Honor piece came in July 2016, when husband-and-wife Jim and Susan Johnson opened Jim's Joint BBQ. The two renovated what was once a market into a new restaurant with character of the past, including a 100-year-old tin ceiling, original hardwood floor and pictures "showing the building and how the town was," Jim Johnson said.

"That's what connects us all. It's history. We're all a part of this community," he said. "We wanted to keep as much as we can of history and those memories, that was very important."

Previous owners of four Lansing-area BBQ locations, the two had come to the Honor area with their family for years and then moved up to retire, initially with no plans to open another restaurant. But, Johnson said, "it's something I think, that spirit that lies inside, you want to keep having a purpose. And we said, well, let's do it.

"There's no looking back, and we're glad we did what we did," he said. "The connection with the community, the people, it's just very special in having that vibe."

Johnson said he sees potential for Platte River Park to be a part of the community shared by residents and visitors alike, a destination that can bring people in and help drive business and "maybe give more pulse to the community here in Honor."

Across the street, Platte River Inn owner Susan Leone agrees. Leone, who owns the restaurant with husband John, said the park will provide needed access and amenities to locals and draw tourists who could frequent businesses for meals, rent a cabin or camp in the area.



Community Input Sessions in Honor to Plan Platte River Park

shopping center. The stretch could eventually lengthen to connect the plaza and downtown with the nearby entrance to Platte River Park.

And across US-31 from the plaza, in A.B. Maley Park, is another improvement thanks to an Eagle Scout who "decided he wanted to do something nice for Honor," Johansson said. The project: a universally accessible wooden covered bridge over a ditch lying between park and highway, providing easy and safe access. "It's nice to have that and allow for people to go from the park to the primary source of commerce right now, the plaza," said Village President Jeff Sandman.

courtesy of:
www.villageofhonor.org

"At that point, we just kind of had to walk away. But then in 2016, HARP came back to us and said the property is still for sale, the asking price has come down from \$450,000 to \$350,000, and they said we've gained some momentum and we just feel so strongly about how important this is to our efforts," Sullivan recalled. The conservancy negotiated the price on behalf of HARP, with HARP assuring them it would raise the money to repay the conservancy.

A new appraisal in 2016 valued the property at \$240,000 and the conservancy was able to negotiate the sellers down to \$300,000, Sullivan said. A collaborative agreement was struck, with the conservancy securing the option to purchase the property as part of a partnership with Homestead Township, the village of Honor, HARP, the Benzie County planning commission, the Benzie Conservation District, the Platte Lake Improvement Association, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Fisheries Division and the Alliance for Economic Success.

Under the plan, the conservancy would front the money to purchase the land, to be repaid by a \$222,000 Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant and \$78,000 match from HARP, of which Rotary Charities supplied \$50,000, said Karlyn Haas, a Traverse City-based freelance grant writer that has written multiple grants for HARP. The land would ultimately be owned by Homestead Township.

In writing for the trust fund grant, "we had to show that this was a really important piece of property with high-quality natural resources that would benefit the region and the people of Michigan and the local area," Haas said. One of the letters of support, penned by Sullivan, cites the diverse features like forests, swamps and habitat for game, as well as 1,550 feet of undeveloped river frontage. "The property creates an easy public access point to a section of the river with an excellent trout and salmon fishery," and offers the opportunity to develop barrier-free access to the river for fishing and a canoe/kayak launch, Sullivan wrote. Additional supporting letters came from the DNR's wildlife and fisheries divisions.

Johansson said "nothing would have happened with this park, had it not been for the Land Conservancy. They were so helpful, they made this whole project doable, because they fronted the money, we didn't have that kind of money." And beyond the money, having such an influential partner resonated with other potential donors, he said.

At the conservancy, "this is what we do," Sullivan said. "It didn't seem like it was a big lift for us. Most of the credit still needs to go to HARP for all the work that they did to make it happen."

Sullivan said parks, natural areas and access to water "play together with improving the physical condition of Honor. It's one of those things where we believe in having access to the outdoors for public recreation, and this was particularly

"The Honor story is a remarkable comeback story for Michigan. A community in distress having the leadership and fortitude to forge a game plan with a strong non-profit companion - achieving great progress toward their vision with strong partners - all the ingredients of a community that we want to learn more about. It sure seems like a great fit with our organization's mission and the ways we can have a supporting role."

- Laura Galbraith, Venture North President



compelling because it's right there next to the village and it tied in so well with the rest of their efforts."

He said the conservancy will play a continuing role, creating signs and informational kiosks for the property.

EACH DONATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

HARP met its goal of raising \$100,000 for the project's second phase, including constructing a parking area, the universally accessible (UA) kayak/canoe launch, restroom and picnic area. HARP hopes to bid that and other work -- such as a UA boardwalk along the riverbank, a paved nonmotorized trail and UA fishing ramp -- in one package this winter, with construction to start in the spring.

Grant writer Haas has pursued numerous foundation and state grants for the project and has been involved since the beginning, seeing it progress "from when it was a dream to now having money. I'm watching this project come to fruition which is really great to be a part of. I'm really looking forward to when I can take my kids to the ribbon-cutting to see."

Haas said many donors have given multiple times. "I think they see Ingemar and the HARP board and how dedicated they are, and we continue to raise money for the next phase and next phase...marking things off the list. I think people see that, and they want to be a part of it."

There have been smaller donations of \$500 apiece, larger single donations in the tens of thousands of dollars, and collective funds like \$12,900 donated this summer by Benzie County 100+ Women Who Care, a group in which each member contributes \$100 quarterly toward a jointly chosen Benzie County nonprofit.

"That's not just about the money; we have 100 women who are friends of the park," Johansson said.

In addition, a \$22,500 donation came in for a critical piece of the park's future: Creation of an endowment, housed at the Manistee County Community Foundation, for long-term park maintenance and improvements.

Johansson said early projections pegged the park at between \$3 million to \$4 million that would need to be raised to from start to finish; community conversations are planned over the next year that will guide upcoming phases and the ultimate cost.

He's not surprised at what's been accomplished. "I would have absolutely thought that we would be where we are today. We never wavered from our vision that this is going to happen. And more things are going to happen," Johansson said.

Honor's Sandman said the park's promise goes beyond the Honor area, to benefit the county. "The more places you have in the county to do something or go recreate...(visitors) come to the park, that might mean they head over to Beulah to have a bite or shop. Or it might mean, if they're coming for a weekend, they might stay for a week. The more things that we have, the longer people are going to stay, the more money they're going to spend."

Just down the road from the park's future entrance on US-31, Field Crafts Inc. owner Jack Gyr said he's seen positive and dramatic impact of nature trails and recreation pursuits in other areas, like with the village of Empire and draw of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore opportunities.

"This park that they have going here, I think both recreationally and commercially...it'll be a great thing," said Gyr, whose 44-year-old business produces embellished

apparel and promotional products. Recreational outdoor activities "improve everybody's life in various ways and part of that is economic, as well as personal health," he said. Gyr said HARP is "terrific. I think Ingemar puts himself out there multiple ways...and I think HARP has done a great job of organizing and trying to get some good activities here, whether it's recreational with the park...or Honor. I'm a big fan."

Johansson said the eight-member HARP board meets at least monthly, a group of local volunteers unpaid for their work. "We're just staunch believers in this, and we're kind of having fun with the whole thing," he said.

In a community lifting itself up, Johansson, a retiree who also plays in the Song of the Lakes folk group, is modest about his role. "It's been very much of a team effort, the whole way through, with people," he said. "One thing leads to another."

Amy Lane is a veteran Michigan business reporter whose background includes work with Crain Communications Inc., Crain's Detroit Business and serving as Capitol correspondent for nearly 25 years. Now a freelance reporter and journalist, Lane's work has appeared in many publications including Traverse City Business News.

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