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“This was a real team effort if ever there was one.” —John Seibert, Valpo Parks

Introduction

The results of a 2002 HyettPalma downtown vibrancy study of the City of Valparaiso highlighted a bright future for the downtown based on enhancing its brand as a dining and entertainment district. The original HyettPalma study was part of a statewide pilot program in partnership with the Indiana Association of Cities and Towns (IACT), which significantly reduced its cost to the city. The study cost was shared among several entities, including the Greater Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, Porter County Community Foundation, Valparaiso Community Festivals and Events, Valparaiso Redevelopment Commission, and Indiana Department of Commerce Community Planning Fund. One of the priorities identified in the study was to improve the grounds around the central courthouse to provide a more welcoming and versatile gathering space for events and general usage.

Political capital:

Leadership from mayor, unity among departments in city government, rebounding after failed collaboration with county



Rendering courtesy City of Valparaiso, Indiana.

Vision

The city’s parks and recreation department (Valpo Parks) developed a plan for the design and maintenance of the area around the courthouse, but Porter County, which owned the property, did not come to agreement on the proposed partnership. Determined to achieve their goals for a downtown gathering space, the city and Valpo Parks began exploring other options. A blighted building two blocks away began the vision for Central Park Plaza. As the project gained momentum, it became clear that the site needed to be even larger to achieve the expanding vision. It grew to encompass an adjacent parking lot property as well.

The Team

Building the park required a team effort internally within city government and collaboration across the community. Under the leadership of the mayor and two successive parks superintendents, the Central Park team included project management, civil engineering, redevelopment, parks and recreation, the clerk-treasurer, and police. Valparaiso City Festivals and Events, the chamber of commerce, and the downtown restaurant association were key partners.

Natural capital:

Parking lot to green space, rain gardens, water conservation, stormwater absorption design elements, use of street for expansion



Photo courtesy City of Valparaiso, Indiana.

Design

The design for Central Park Plaza emerged over four years, from a modest plaza to a full-block park with an expanded permanent amphitheater. While the predominant social and cultural vision for the park was as a place to host events and gatherings, there was also an environmental purpose. Having green space in a downtown setting provides human as well as ecological benefits.

Enhancing the natural amenities of the parcel was central to the design. Save the Dunes planted native plant rain gardens with educational signage. Catacomb silva cells, an underground frame that allows for high-quality soil and expanded tree root growth, help absorb rainwater runoff in this low-lying area. The city engineering and public works departments were involved, because a sewer main goes right under the park. The decision to recycle splash pad water in an underground pool was made at added cost to conserve water. Tree planting and turf decisions also took into account water usage and maintenance requirements.

Closing the adjacent road creates additional space for large events and twice-weekly farmers markets. During events the street is used for food vendors, large party tents, car shows, or additional crowd control. Temporary barriers can be installed to make ticketed events possible or to cordon off adult-only beer gardens. These flexible design features have allowed for mixed usage of the park by a wide range of audiences without additional land ownership or infrastructure.

Amenities

Central Park Plaza is anchored at the south end by a large brick amphitheater with restrooms and a brick patio in front. The new regional hospital purchased naming rights for the amphitheater on a three-year contract, with the funds directed toward ongoing park maintenance. The center of the plaza features a seasonal splash pad with fountains for safe water play for young children. A local family business that

Built capital: Amphitheater, restrooms, lawns, plaza, splash pad, statue, gateway



Photo courtesy City of Valparaiso, Indiana.

manufactures firefighting nozzles and equipment internationally sponsored the splash pad as a good fit with its mission. Another family business, which had humble beginnings downtown before growing into larger facilities on the edge of town, sponsored a brick entryway for the park featuring a bronze statue of Valparaiso's famous native son, Orville Redenbacher. Other features include an artistic sculptured bike rack, electronic marquee sign, parking cut-outs, and a speaker system that plays music daily.

Funding

Central Park Plaza opened in 2011 with a final price tag of \$3.5 million. The story is one worth telling. From humble beginnings, the project grew as more people took ownership of the vision. Determined not to incur debt or bonds, the mayor and parks superintendent strategized to find the right balance of private fundraising, grants, redevelopment funds, and corporate sponsorship. Their key message was an enhanced quality of life that could attract talent and keep young people in the region—a fundamental economic development strategy.

Financial capital: City budgets aligned from all departments, no debt, lead corporate sponsor with naming rights, two additional major sponsors, scope increased to give a better value proposition, maintenance built into capital campaign, sponsors seeking extension of contracts

Strong corporate relationships fostered through the award-winning Valpo Chamber allowed project leaders to approach funders in a thoughtful way,

aligning their unique business goals with their desire to leave a legacy and contribute to the quality of community life. The decision to court a major sponsor for the naming rights, which was tied to a three-year maintenance agreement, was key. However, at the time there was only one likely corporate partner. Valpo Parks Superintendent Seibert recalls the intensity of the moment he approached the donor, knowing that the fate of the project could hinge on it. “There was no plan B,” he said. “We had to get it right.” The funder saw the value proposition in the vision, and after a successful run has sought to renew its naming rights contract.

Usage and maintenance

Valpo Parks maintains and oversees bookings for Central Park Plaza. The department has a key partnership with the nonprofit Valparaiso Community Festivals and Events (VCFE), which hosts major events such as the Popcorn Festival, Brewfest, and farmers market. In 2013, VCFE rented and re-booked 90 days of events at the park, with other private groups and organizations booking an additional 70.

Turf maintenance, trash pickup, venue size control, street closures, and security coverage are some of the biggest issues that Valpo Parks has confronted, although thoughtful planning, flexibility, dedicated staff, and a maintenance budget have allowed the park to be successful through this growing stage. Valpo Parks and VCFE have carefully monitored event size, incrementally testing the capacity to host larger crowds.

Arts, Culture, and Community

From headlining artists to local orchestras and weekly buskers, musical performances have been the main attractions at Central Park Plaza, often in conjunction with larger events. The bigger acts so far have included Blue Oyster Cult, Rusted Root, and Gin Blossoms.

Cultural capital: Festivals, movies, music, theater, car shows, food, farmers markets, wine and beer

The park has allowed many longstanding festivals and events to grow, and it has inspired several new ones. One unexpected hit has been free summer Shakespeare in the Park performances by a local theater company. Record crowds attended the inaugural performance in an overwhelming show of interest in the arts by a wide diversity of attendees. Free family movie nights during the summer are a weekly draw as well.

For years prior to the park’s creation, a small farmers market limped along in a separate venue, plagued by lack of parking, electricity, and welcoming space for booths and patrons. Since moving to Central Park Plaza, the twice-weekly event has continued to attract increasing numbers of unique vendors and shoppers, including young families, foodies, and those who work or live downtown. The splash pad and stage provide entertainment that keeps people engaged longer and builds a stronger sense of community.

Human capital: Exercise and health opportunities, leadership skills, organizing capacity, collaboration



Rendering courtesy City of Valparaiso, Indiana.

As a public amenity, the park fulfills a mission of serving the full diversity of Valparaiso residents. It provides a well-lit, safe hangout space for teens in the summer; and a gathering place for group exercise, community vigils, speakers, and anyone who wants to try their hand at singing or dancing on a big stage.

Outcomes

The process of quantifying the quality-of-life impacts resulting from this investment in the community is in its beginning stages. However, it is already clear that the park's impact can be measured in different ways, depending on the stakeholder group. For example, property values adjacent to the park have increased, which has benefited property-owners. Increased demand for housing and apartments near downtown has led to the revitalization of aging properties and decreased vacancy in second-floor apartments. Higher property values have also led to higher property

taxes for businesses adjacent to the park, and a few that did not benefit from increased foot traffic and visibility have left.

The resulting churn has opened the door for several new businesses that complement the park and build on the city's brand as a dining and entertainment hub.

Social capital: Increased diversity, groups engaging, people interacting, organizations partnering

The strongest testament to the value of the Central Park Plaza is the decision to build Phase 2, to be completed in 2015. An \$8 million addition to the park, with expansion to the west, will house a large multiuse pavilion and adjacent building for winter ice-skating and summer events. The growing numbers of events and attendees reflect the value that Central Park Plaza brings to the greater community. Phase 1 exceeded expectations, elevated a need, and inspired community involvement to even greater vision.



Photo courtesy City of Valparaiso, Indiana.