



SAULT STE MARIE MAIN
STREET IS DRIVING
COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION
IN MICHIGAN'S OLDEST CITY

DOWNTOWN SAULT STE. MARIE

Narrative by Stephanie Sprecker,
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Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part
of the Michigan Main Street Story
Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Leading By Example

"My uncle worked for a liquor wine and cigar distributor in Dallas, and he would always send my dad and me nice cigars. When the time came to think about starting a business in town, I thought, 'You know what, every time we travel, we go to a place like this. But every time we come home, we don't have one.'

So, when the opportunity came, it was about a 10 minute conversation with my dad:

'I found a place, should we get it?'

'Yes.'

'All right. Let's do it.'

Austin's Cigar Lounge is in a building built in 1892 by the Vanderhook family, who were both the furniture makers and undertakers in the community. You never have a crystal ball and we officially opened in July 2019...and then it was 2020. So it has been a very fun few years! But we're still here, and we're going to celebrate four years in July, and if I've learned anything, it's that tomorrow's a good day.

I think it's important to lead by example, and that's why I joined the Main Street board. I knew that opening a business helps the community, but I also like giving back and volunteering my time as a way to show everybody that we can do more. Let's volunteer! Let's come together! Let's work together!

The thing that I'm most proud of is that when this community needs to come together to do something, they do it. Take the Soo Theater renovation project. That is very much a community project and you see a lot of people donating to help save a historical building and bring it back to what it was historically.

I think that is one of the greatest things about our community: when we really need help, when we need to get things done, everybody comes together and helps out. They make sure that we're going to come out better than what we were before."

— Craig Cooper, Sault Ste. Marie Main Street Board Chair and Business Owner

The Oldest City in Michigan

"Sault Ste. Marie is actually the oldest city in the state of Michigan. We began in 1668 and we really try to capitalize on that, because we have such a rich history here. We have St. Mary's River, which has our famous Soo Locks, directly in our downtown. It forms a natural border between Sault, Ontario, and Sault, Michigan. For anybody that's visiting, it's just a unique environment: we have such a rich history, with an international border, and people can watch freighters go by while they're getting a cup of coffee, having a cigar, or going into one of our many shops downtown.

The summer is definitely our busiest time of year, with the Soo Locks obviously being the number one tourist attraction. One of our long-term goals is to make our downtown a year-round tourist spot. We do have a lot of year-round shops and restaurants downtown, but we really want to expand on that. If you look at the area, it's really a four-season place to visit with the Soo Locks, snowmobiling, off-roading, hiking, biking, kayaking, boating and fishing. You can't find a nicer area to come



DOWN TOWN Soo



"You can't find a nicer area to come visit if you enjoy outdoor activities, so we're looking forward to growing the number of year-round amenities."

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If you were to take a time machine and go back and look at our community as a whole, especially with the Air Force base closing to now, it's easy for residents who live here to get lost in what's going on. They don't always see what's changed, because they live here every day, they go down the roads, and they look at the same things. But they would be in awe if we put a slideshow together to see all the changes that have really occurred over that time.

I was born and raised here. I went away for school, but my heart is here in Sault Ste. Marie. So, when I saw the opportunity after grad school to come and apply for this position, it fell right into my career path and I said, 'I would love to be a part of making our community a better place. Let's do this!'

I am the Main Street director, which is specific to our downtown, but I look at the community as a whole, working closely with all of our community partners like the Sault Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce. If we have a strong downtown, then we have a strong community. If we have a strong community, we have a strong downtown.

Now more than ever, we have such a great group of leaders who share the same vision of where we want this community to go, and I'm just so proud to be a part of that."

– Stephanie Sprecker, Sault Ste. Marie Main Street Director

Tribal Partnerships in Revitalization

"We have two tribes that are very embedded here in the Sault Ste. Marie community. We have the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, which is the largest tribe east of the Mississippi, and to have such a large tribe headquartered right here in downtown Sault Ste. Marie is huge. They are not just physically headquartered here, but



they're really involved with our community, our downtown development, and our Main Street program. They are financial supporters, they help with events, and they are at the table with us when we do a lot of different things with our Main Street program. Then we also have the Bay Mills Indian community, and they have a brand new health clinic being constructed, right across from City Hall. A huge part of our population in this community are enrolled tribal members of both the Sault and Bay Mills tribes and that really is important to us as a Main Street community, especially when we look into the future.

We can't take a cookie-cutter approach; we have to look at what is here. The tribes are here and they are a huge part of our community, so they are important to us."

– Craig Cooper and Stephanie Sprecker, Sault Ste. Marie Main Street

Connecting Campus to Community

"Lake State University is a huge part of our community and we are really working on strengthening the relationship between them and our Main Street program. Lake State is integral to the success of Sault Ste. Marie, and Sault Ste. Marie is integral to the success of Lake Superior State. We can make sure that prospective students who visit enjoy the town and feel that they want to come here; that helps both the community and

Lake State.

When you look at a college campus, it's not just 21 –year olds: you're talking 18, 19 and 20 –year olds. What can we provide for them? You can't just say 'we have bars.' We have to figure out what those age groups are looking for. How can we provide entertainment and other venues for them to get out of their dorm rooms, get off campus and get downtown and interact with the community?"

– Craig Cooper and Stephanie Sprecker, Sault Ste. Marie Main Street

Bringing Residents Downtown to Stay

"One of the state's strategies to help revitalize downtown communities is to get people living downtown again. Historically, when somebody would come in and open a business, people would build a two-story building: your business was on the main floor and you lived above it. The building Austin's Cigar Lounge is in has two commercial spaces and four apartments upstairs. When all four apartments upstairs are filled, you've got another four to eight people living in the middle of your downtown. When they get off work, or on the weekends, what are they doing? They're going to go walk around, they're going to shop and spend money. We think if we can get people living in our downtown, it will help boost the feel of community.

To that end, we have some recent

projects that are adding residential units. Right across the street from us, we have a building next to the theater that was recently purchased and is going to add between nine and 12 apartments on the top, and three new commercial spaces on the bottom.

Then we have the MAC building, a huge project that is in process right now that will be another 12 apartments in a 121-year-old building, and the Children's Museum building just updated all of the apartments there. So, you're looking at about 30 apartments coming into use downtown, plus the new Osborne building, and we've got another one that's slated to start soon in the old county annex building, another six to 10 apartments.

It's one of our core focuses to get people living downtown again and engaged, so it's definitely great to see that happening."

– Craig Cooper and Stephanie Sprecker, Sault Ste. Marie Main Street

Main Street: Local Program, State Support, and a National Movement

"Sault Ste. Marie became a Main Street community in 2017. Then, after showing a five-year commitment to the program, we became a Master Level community, which is the highest level you can achieve.

One of the biggest benefits to joining the Michigan Main Street program is the help that they give. It's not just about funding, but the technical assistance and guidance you receive. You're in a long line of communities who have been in your situation before, and through Michigan Main Street, you gain access to all of their information and assistance in creating your transformational strategy. You can try to reinvent the wheel, but the Main Street program is there to give you guidance rather than try to start from scratch.

For those who don't understand or know what Main Street is, it's a movement. Main Street was created to help revitalize older commercial districts, and that's

exactly what was needed here in Sault Ste. Marie. Many of the physical improvements that have been made here to our existing buildings are because of the Main Street program. They have a great Match on Main Street grant program and we've made some awesome improvements and enhancements to our buildings because of that. That not only benefits the businesses in those buildings, but it benefits the businesses surrounding them, because when you have more vibrant buildings, you have a more vibrant downtown.

Aside from that, our former Main Street director had the vision that Main Street could drive a sense of community, and it did that. Before it was our downtown and our DDA, but now it's more than that and it's still growing. It almost gives a sense of comfort, warmth and family. Volunteerism and getting people involved is up.

As an organization, Main Street is one giant community. We just finished a Zoom call with all the other chairs of the other Main Street communities in Michigan to connect and network with each other. You can ask, 'Hey, has anybody ever had dealt with this? What's

your advice on this?' You get to bounce a lot of ideas off each other. It makes you feel like you're not alone. There is support and somebody that's been there before and knows what you're going through."

– Craig Cooper and Stephanie Sprecker, Sault Ste. Marie Main Street

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