



**POSITIVE MOMENTUM BUILDS  
FROM MATCH ON MAIN AND  
JUNIOR MAIN STREET  
PROGRAM**

# CHARLEVOIX

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Narrative by Lindsey Dotson,  
Charlevoix Main Street Director, and  
Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part  
of the Michigan Main Street Story  
Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

## **Getting to Know Charlevoix**

“My name is Lindsey Dotson and I’m the Main Street DDA Director in the City of Charlevoix. On the surface, Charlevoix is one of the most spectacularly beautiful places you will ever see. Pretty much everywhere you look, there’s a water view, especially downtown. We have an award-winning, best-in-America marina that’s a big draw for boaters because of the access to a great inland lake, plus Lake Michigan. The architecture is charming.

But, when you look a little closer, this community is authentic, and that’s what I really enjoy about Charlevoix. We don’t have chain stores here. Nearly every business is a small business and most of them are owner-operated. Some of our small business owners are from here and some of them chose to come here and invest. Charlevoix is a close-knit, awesome place to be.

It’s a seasonal town with a seasonal economy, but we’re trying to make the downtown a more year-round place. That means finding ways for more businesses to



stay open year-round without having to take out loans. Our program has shifted drastically in the last five years or so because we went from adding winter activities in the form of events to doing redevelopment work and having conversations that are going to change the fabric of what our downtown is.

Along the way, everyone kind of came together and agreed the main way we're going to make our downtown a year-round place is if we have more people living in it, period. Year-round housing is how we're going to achieve that—not luxury condos that are only occupied a few months out of the year or events that bring people to town just for the day.

Charlevoix can appeal to a lot of folks as a great place to live. We do offer an incredibly walkable downtown that has access to water and pretty much all the services that you need. We have a grocery store, we have a pharmacy, we have an eye doctor. And so, essentially, our role in the future is to incentivize people to create housing units that will be occupied year-round.

To do this, we've created a program that's pretty aggressive: it's affiliated with a deed restriction on a property that says it has to be occupied 10 out of 12 months out of the year. It's a reimbursement, up to \$25,000 per unit, that we're willing to give to make that happen. The program just launched this year, and it's such a big conversation to have. Of course, short-term vacation rentals are more lucrative, but that's not what our community needs right now."

### Junior Main Street Program

"We have a Junior Main Street Program in Charlevoix, which allows local high school seniors the opportunity to get involved in improving the downtown. The program is now in its sixth year, and every year we go to the high school, the students identify a project that can be done within the school year, and they do all the fundraising, planning, and outreach. Every year, it's a different group with different interests, and it's been incredible to see what they can accomplish.

For the first year, I asked the students, 'What do you think would make our downtown better for you?' They identified a

lot of things that either already existed or had already happened, so we realized there was a gap in how teenagers were receiving information about our downtown. From there, they decided they wanted to create an app that would make all that downtown information easily accessible to them. The students worked on developing the app with a company, it took off, and it has now been downloaded to more than 10,000 devices.

Our Junior Main Street Program has taken on a handful of placemaking projects over the years in Charlevoix, and all of them have been transformative. For example, they did a placemaking project for one of our alleys, added benches, a chess set, and some giant historic photos of our downtown so people could just stop and have a conversation. Now, you constantly see people of all ages just hanging out there. People are eating ice cream, there's a Jenga set at one of the tables that people are always playing with, the after-bar crowd gathers there. It has become a place that was nothing before, and that was a Junior Main Street placemaking initiative.

The high schoolers involved in Junior Main Street have helped us reimagine Charlevoix's green space, too. For example, our East Park is award-winning, offers up great views and is a great place to have a picnic and have your dog run around.

But they asked, 'How can we use East Park differently, especially in the wintertime? Let's start letting people sled there. Let's add igloos that are open to the community so someone can get carry-out and go hang out with their friends.' That's a very new initiative for winter, specifically, and it was a struggle to get there, but Junior Main Street was like, 'Let's just try this.'

And it's been going so well. They also created a hammock park out on our channel by putting up poles and chains and a sign that said, 'Bring your hammock here and take in the day.' And all the things they've done have been accessible to anyone and have made these small spaces that were kind of unused before way more interesting.

Any community can benefit from placemaking. To get started, take a step back and try to imagine vibrancy, try to be



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authentic, figure out if there's some aspect of your downtown that isn't serving the community and ask, 'How can it?' And most placemaking initiatives are not permanent changes. You can try things out, and, if they don't work, you can adjust accordingly. So why not just try it?"

### Match on Main Grant Program

"Match on Main is one of the best programs that has come out of the MEDC. It's a grant program specifically for small business owners who are either filling a vacant space or growing in some way. Usually, we're talking about very small businesses with a handful of employees. It's cold, hard cash—up to \$25,000—to help an idea become a little bit more stable and more successful.

And even though the grant comes from the state, there's a local approval process for the businesses based on several criteria, including our local goals. It's great to be able to give someone that boost either in the beginning or during a phase of growth that they wouldn't have been able to get otherwise. We've been fortunate to receive funding almost every round since the program started, and including COVID assistance, we've had about 15 businesses touched by that funding. That's significant, especially in a town like ours, where the economy is very seasonal. At times, it has been normal for businesses to take out loans from the local bank in the winter just to keep the lights on.



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One of the businesses that have benefitted from this funding is a cafe that's going to be opening sometime this spring, called Cafe Meria. The owner is a young guy who was born in Charlevoix and just moved back from California. He's a photographer and was doing marketing work in the Bay Area and decided to move back to Northern Michigan and open a cafe that can be a kind of gathering place for the community. We have a lot of places in town that serve coffee, but many of them are only open until the mid-afternoon, and when we have surveyed the public and asked what kinds of businesses they'd like to see in town, a coffee shop is always at the top of the list.

What they mean by that is not just a place to grab a cup and go, but a comfy, cozy place with couches where you can stay awhile and not feel bad about taking up space. And that's exactly the kind of business he wants to bring to our cute little town. So he was awarded the \$25,000, and it's going to help him buy equipment. Of course, he had personal savings that had been building with this dream in mind, but he's more than happy to have a boost.

A restaurant called Smoke on the Water is another example. They smoke all their own meats and it just kind of fills the downtown with that wonderful smell and draws you in. They make everything from scratch, even down to making their own ketchup and barbecue sauce, nothing is ever frozen, and everything takes a little extra time. It's located in this old house, so it has that kind of charm to it. It's really small, but, in the summertime, they have a lot of outdoor seating and mature trees that create beautiful shade. It's just a pleasant place that has incredible food.

They just got a grant through Match on Main for an expansion that will be great for them because they're growing. They're going to be able to rearrange everything, get better equipment, reduce wait times and increase production.

And we have My Grandmother's Table, another recipient of the Match on Main program. One of the owners grew up in a diverse neighborhood in New York, and, when he was a child, his grandmother would have community dinners and invite anyone from the neighborhood, and they would always have different varieties of cooking, like Hungarian and Polish dishes. And because most of the restaurants in town offer American food, he wanted to diversify the selection for people. So the concept behind My Grandmother's Table is that it's open to anybody and features dishes that are global, including Native American recipes, which are pertinent to our local history. They're just incredible people that chose to come to Charlevoix and do this thing. And they just expanded and obtained a liquor license, so now they can offer that. It's great to see them growing as such a young business, and they, too, were recipients of the Match on Main program when they first opened up.

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## Redevelopment Ready Communities

"Redevelopment Ready Communities is another program of the MEDC that lays the groundwork for local government to be both as development- and business-friendly as possible. As you start to become engaged in the program, they send key staff to training and give you templates, resources, and best practices for things like site plan review and suggestions for your website so people can find the information they need. They help with all the things that go into a community being able to say 'yes' to someone who wants to invest there. Of course, it's a thorough process locally, and MEDC, thankfully, does bring some resources to the table to try to help communities through that.

When we first became engaged with the program, we received some funding to do our downtown plan, so we worked with our Networks Northwest which is a regional organization that we work with for planning. They paid about \$10,000 for us to go through that process, which was excellent.

Sometimes, local communities don't feel like they have the capacity to do all these extra things that are needed to get certified, and so another great program that has been created through the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan is a fellowship program specific to helping communities become certified. We got a fellow last year, and he was the one who came in, looked at what we had gotten done, looked at the very long list of things we still needed to do, and just started checking them off.

And it was incredible. We got certified this past spring, and, since then, we've been able to tap into a group of very highly-qualified professionals within the MEDC's umbrella who are helping us move everything forward with under-utilized space in the downtown."

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## What's the Benefit of Being a Main Street Community?

"Being a Main Street community keeps your town authentic and connected to everybody's needs. It's not only the connection to the resources that we have, but the ideas and people and their wealth of knowledge and experience as well. Locally, having the committee structure be an open door to anyone who wants to get involved allows people to feel like they can be a part of something important. They come to the table with experiences and perspectives that none of us in city hall will ever understand.

This is vetted through people in the community. All these business owners are at the table. Main Street brings everybody together and gives them a voice that we need to listen to. It keeps us real, keeps us connected, and keeps us on our toes."

– Lindsey Dotson, Charlevoix Main Street Director

To learn more, visit [downtowncharlevoix.com](http://downtowncharlevoix.com), find Downtown Charlevoix on Facebook and Instagram, and download the Life in Charlevoix app.







# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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