



IN NORTHERN MICHIGAN, MAIN
STREET HAS PAVED THE WAY
FOR REDEVELOPMENT AND
COMMUNITY PRIDE

DOWNTOWN CHEBOYGAN

Narrative by Polly Schneider,
Executive Director of Cheboygan
Main Street DDA, and John Costin,
Vice Chair of Cheboygan Main
Street DDA and Business Owner,
and Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as
part of the Michigan Main Street
Story Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Community Development through Main Street

"Before Main Street, I worked at the Chamber of Commerce in event planning and then as executive director. When I started at the Chamber, we were at the very beginning stages of learning about the Main Street program. Working there really prepared me for my work with Main Street; knowing both the community and all the business owners. It's been an easy transition, but a very fulfilling and exciting one, too.

The Cheboygan Main Street program started in about 2017. I have to give credit to Bring It Cheboygan, a group of volunteers that grew to around 400 strong. They wanted Cheboygan to become better. They saw opportunities for our community and joined another group looking to join the MEDC Main Street community.

Bring It set forth a vision and a mission for the future. It was a huge effort by not only those 400 volunteers, but almost the whole community. It took an army of people to put the whole process together. It took many partners, including business owners, the community, City Council, and the DDA.

We wanted to build up the economic side of Main Street. We felt that if Main Street was successful, the whole community of Cheboygan would benefit. We started forming a steering committee with our own vision and mission, then we realized the great benefits of being part of the MEDC Main Street community and decided to follow that process.

Cheboygan had boarded-up windows downtown. It was practically a ghost town, except for a few great visionaries and long-standing business owners who wouldn't give up. Volunteers actually went down Main Street and washed all the windows of the vacant buildings and they put products and photographs in the windows to help show the potential.

We realized we needed an extra boost. Learning about the Main Street program and understanding the format and the framework it gives you...we just had to try it. The opportunities Main Street has opened for business assistance and grant funding are incredible."

—Polly Schneider, Cheboygan Main Street DDA Executive Director & John Costin, Vice Chair of Cheboygan Main Street DDA and Business Owner

John Costin, Tourist to Business Owner

"My wife, Marcella, and I ended up here quite by mistake, really. We're from St. Clair, near Detroit, and we used to bring our boat up to Cheboygan on vacation. From here, you can go anywhere.

On one trip, we dropped a prop and had to put our boat in Walstrom Marine for repair. Marcella asked, 'Why do we go through this pain of bringing the boat up—why don't we just leave it up here?' So, we did. That caused us to walk around more, and then we saw a piece of land with a building for sale.

We opened up a pop-up store for three months, October through December. We brought some of our staff up from our boutique downstate and opened our business within 10 to 12 days. The business did very well, so we did it again the second year and we felt a little bit like pirates walking away with the money after three months!



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Then an old building came up for sale and we jumped in. Shortly afterward, the neighboring buildings came up for sale. Even though it was a bit of a risk, we thought it was a good idea to invest in Cheboygan. We're very happy we did and now we have several businesses in town and we joined another band of investors.

Property prices were low at that point. One initiative was an advertisement placed in all the local newspapers with all the vacant buildings—it was a huge number. Then they did it a second year and there were half that number. It kept decreasing and I think that was a tipping point for Cheboygan and the right time to invest.

But for something like this to work, you have to fall in love with the community and the people. This is a very, very friendly and supportive community. There's a huge group of people who used to shop and eat and drink somewhere else. We thought there was potential to actually do that right here in Cheboygan and luckily, a lot of other people think the same way.

You obviously have to like the environment, too. We have the best, cleanest air, by what the data shows. We have the water—the big lake, the inland waterway and our inland lakes.

Looking into the future, I think it starts with community input, because to take any next step, everybody would have to be on board to do it. I believe great community input, the opening up of the riverfront, and the properties that we've purchased, all create a wonderful future for Cheboygan. I think that's the next big thing for Cheboygan. Above and beyond all of that, we need to maintain the momentum because we need more volunteers and to continue to reinvent ourselves."

—John Costin, Vice Chair of Cheboygan Main Street DDA and Business Owner

'Good Quiet' and Thoughtful Transformation

"I've lived all over the state of Michigan and nothing is quite like this place. My family moved here from the Grand Rapids area 10 years ago.



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We came up and stayed a week, kind of scoping out the area, and we fell in love with Cheboygan. We loved the community, even though it was quiet. It's a good quiet—it's 'Up North' the way you remember it. That's one really unique thing about Cheboygan and we're not going to lose that. We definitely get busy. But the pulse of Cheboygan is steady—we never stray from being that family community.

That's Cheboygan—friendly, accommodating and helpful.

Thoughtful transformation is very important, and we wholeheartedly believe we're on that track. You can have bad transformation, too—just making quick fixes—which has happened in Cheboygan in the past.

What you need for good transformation is the whole community going in one direction. Looking back to 2017 or 2018, we had groups of people who were all working very hard, but independently in silos and not pulling together. City Council was going in one direction, the DDA in another, and Bring It was looking in another direction.

Today, we are very fortunate that all those groups came together—now, they are all going forward under the Main Street umbrella. We think the right people are in place, at the right time, to make these transformational things happen for the future of the community.

Community input is critical and we're never going to thrive unless the residents and visitors are happy. It's about actually listening, while not having our own agendas. It means really thinking about the future and what's best for those coming after us.

A lot of communities have that problem. They do what they want to do now, not thinking about what's going to happen in the future.



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Looking to the future, we need to continue cultivating an ever-growing group of volunteers. Someone said the other day that they went to a volunteer meeting and didn't know a single person in the room—and that's great! In the past, you went to a meeting and you knew everybody, because there was only a small group of people who had to volunteer for every event that took place in Cheboygan.

Having worked with organizations and volunteers, and coordinating for several years, it's about engaging the younger generation. Every discussion highlights the generational gap. It's letting the younger generation know this is the right thing to do. If you love your community and you enjoy being a part of it, then it's time to do something, even if it's just a couple hours pulling weeds, pruning trees, or washing windows.

It's letting everybody know that their input and time are valued and appreciated. It's amazing seeing how the older generation of volunteers—which, in most communities, that's where the volunteers are—learn from the younger generation, and vice versa. It's bringing everybody together and making them understand that if you don't start doing this now, nobody is going to continue doing what we've been working so hard to do.”

—Polly Schneider, Cheboygan Main Street DDA Executive Director & John Costin, Vice Chair of Cheboygan Main Street DDA and Business Owner

DDA Leading Riverfront Development

“I'm a fairly new Main Street director—I've been in my position since March 2022. Basically, my first five months with the Cheboygan Main Street program involved working on purchasing a key piece for our riverfront development. Until now, the DDA has never purchased a large property for future development. We've got a great city manager who sees the value in being in the game when it comes to developing our riverfront.

We're getting community input as to what



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we want to see happen with our riverfront. Our Main Street is looking good. We don't have very many empty storefronts now, and where we do, there are plans for new businesses. The riverfront is just the next street over and it's prime for thoughtful development.

One of our biggest assets is the river. We want people to be able to come to Cheboygan and stay downtown, not pass through. The river is really a secret—unless you know where it is when you come through Cheboygan, you'll miss it. There is an opportunity for a beautiful boardwalk and the opportunity to sit out and have a drink or a picnic by the river.

Also, here in Cheboygan, we've got more miles of trails than any other county in Michigan. We've got a trailhead just three blocks off Main Street downtown that converges with three major trails. A group of people worked to get us accredited as a Pure Michigan Trails Town.

We have a jewel here with our Opera House and The Kingston—a wonderful

old movie theater right in downtown Cheboygan. We even have a glass bottom boat!

We always want to be a family-friendly destination. The Chamber of Commerce and the Visitors Bureau do most of the legwork on attracting visitors to Cheboygan. Then, the Northern Lakes Economic Alliance works behind the scenes to really help with development and moving the community forward with good-paying jobs.”

—Polly Schneider, Cheboygan Main Street DDA Executive Director & John Costin, Vice Chair of Cheboygan Main Street DDA and Business Owner

The Value of Michigan Main Street

“Cheboygan is such a unique place that attracts people from all over. We have a brand-new coffee roaster—owned by a wonderful family who also has a business in New Hampshire. We've got the perfect mix here downtown. We've got kids who have lived their whole lives in Cheboygan and are not interested in

going anywhere else. Then we have people like John Costin, who transformed an entire block basically, and really got the ball rolling.

Grants through Match on Main have made a big difference. Cheboygan Brewing Company received a Match on Main grant for their beautiful beer garden where they have live music every Friday and Saturday night.

Another Match on Main recipient is Hive North, a unique cider and mead hall that also has craft sodas and beers on tap. They have art from local artists for sale on the walls and you can bring in your own food and enjoy whatever is happening.

Another one is the gorgeous Hair Design & Shine Boutique, which used to be an old NAPA Auto Parts store. It's phenomenal and thriving right down on Main Street.

Downtown is the heartbeat of any community. With Cheboygan, the county seat is right here, so it's about engaging and bringing everyone in from around the community to have ownership downtown. We need people to understand that when we're thriving down here, the ripple effect will take place.

We've got tons of apartments coming downtown above some of the buildings and we're looking at ways to add more housing. Five years from now, I see progress on the riverfront—maybe it's not fully developed yet, but I see definite progress, more businesses, new ways to bring more businesses in.

There's more community pride now, and I think in another five years, if we build on what we've done the last five years, it's going to be a beautiful thing to leave for our grandchildren and everybody else who will be here.

If you are thinking about getting into the Main Street program, make sure everybody in your community wants to do it. It's not a casual thing. It's expensive. It takes time, but it's very, very rewarding.

You have nothing to lose. If nothing else, it will bring you together and help you realize your potential. It provides the structure and the framework to make things easy and successful.

They help you work through how to get things done. That's probably one of the best things is being able to call them at any time and ask, 'Hey, have you ever run into this? Who do I talk to about this?' Getting that extra support from the experts and the way doors open up for entrepreneurs from being part of the Main Street program is phenomenal."

—Polly Schneider, Cheboygan Main Street DDA Executive Director & John Costin, Vice Chair of Cheboygan Main Street DDA and Business Owner





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