



MICHIGAN
MAIN STREET

CASE STUDY: NILES NODE (NILES OUTDOOR DINING EXPERIENCE)

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The NODE in Niles, Michigan, is an outdoor gathering space created to revitalize downtown by providing a vibrant spot for dining and community events. Established through local collaboration and supported by grants, it transformed a section of Main Street into a pedestrian-friendly area. The NODE aims to attract visitors, support local businesses, and foster community connections.

The idea for The NODE was sparked by the City Administrator, who noticed the success of outdoor dining in other areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Niles initially hesitated to introduce outdoor dining, a renewed focus on the concept emerged after a second round of restaurant closures, pushing the city to explore new options.

The project was strategically located in an area with a strong tradition of hosting outdoor events, which helped facilitate its quick setup. Despite the challenges posed by the winter season, the team successfully established the dining space within three weeks.

Key to the project's success were two nearby property owners who also served on the Niles Main Street Board. Their efforts to rally support from other local stakeholders were instrumental in ensuring the project's swift execution, offering essential relief to local businesses during a difficult period.



The NODE initiative in Niles successfully established a vibrant community gathering space that was popular year-round, including in winter. Recognized by MLIVE as the best outdoor dining area in Southwest Michigan in 2021, the NODE positively impacted local businesses by increasing their revenue. Several businesses adapted their offerings to align with the Food Experience Transformation strategy, such as Brass Eye selling beverages to go, Pizza Transit offering s'mores kits, Apothica Teas introducing specialty marshmallows, and Veni's Chocolate providing specialty chocolates.

The NODE's popularity, particularly during events like Third Thursdays, concerts, and outdoor yoga classes, demonstrated the community's desire for a permanent gathering space. Following the NODE's closure, Niles Main Street and Michigan Main Street conducted a study involving stakeholders to identify the best location, design, and community interest for a permanent outdoor space. Based on positive survey results and the study, the Council approved the creation of a permanent space with construction set to begin in 2024.

KEY SUCCESSSES

Notable Success: The NODE was recognized as the best outdoor dining area in Southwest Michigan by MLIVE in 2021 and positively impacted local businesses by increasing revenue.

Community-Driven Growth: The success of The NODE highlighted the community's desire for a permanent gathering space, leading to the approval of The Forge, with construction planned for 2024.

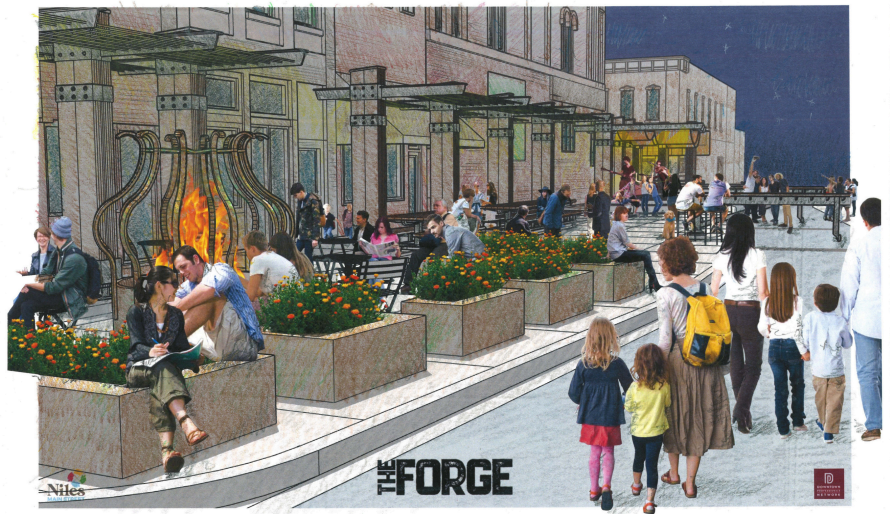
Increased Vitality: Local businesses adapted their offerings to align with the Food Experience Transformation strategy, enhancing their services to complement The NODE experience.

PROJECT FUNDING

The Node, initially established with community-driven efforts including a \$7,000 fire pit, benches from local parks, palettes for wind-breaks donated by a local company, lights, and tables donated by a local newspaper, laid the foundation for a vibrant outdoor gathering space in Niles.

Building upon this success, Niles Main Street secured substantial funding, including a Michigan Main Street Vibrancy Grant and a Revitalization and Placemaking Grant totaling \$1.287 million. City Council further committed \$808,000 from ARPA funds to match these grants, allocating \$1 million for streetscape improvements, \$30,000 for outdoor restrooms, and \$676,000 towards the development of The NODE.

This funding paves the way for the transformation of The Node into The Forge, a permanent outdoor space that promises to enhance community engagement and bolster Niles' local economy.



CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

- Effective communication and engagement with stakeholders, providing accurate and relevant information tailored to each group, are crucial.
- Ensuring all board members could articulate its value succinctly would have bolstered support.
- Persistence and advocacy are vital in improving the community and downtown areas.

Despite its success in creating a vibrant community space, surrounding local business owners raised objections, leading to appeals to City Council against making the NODE permanent. Ultimately, due to this opposition, the NODE was shut down, causing the resignation of three Niles Main Street Board members.

Following the closure, Niles Main Street conducted a comprehensive study, funded by MI Main Street, to identify a suitable location for a permanent outdoor space and to gather community support. Key lessons emerged from this experience, including the value of effective communication and engagement with stakeholders and leaders. Niles Main Street learned they must provide accurate and relevant information that is tailored to each group, whether it was business owners, property owners, or the City Council, as a crucial priority. In addition, the organization learned they should have shared the value of the NODE showing data about its core impact and importance earlier to stakeholders to bolster support, ensuring all board members could articulate its value succinctly. Despite setbacks, it was essential the organization did not abandon the project due to the negativity, as it promised significant community benefits. Persistence and advocacy are vital in improving the community and downtown areas.

These lessons inform Niles Main Street's ongoing efforts to develop a permanent outdoor space that enhances community cohesion and economic vitality while navigating challenges and building consensus among stakeholders.



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