



**GRAYLING MAIN STREET HAS
BROUGHT COLLABORATION
AND VIBRANCY TO THE
DOWNTOWN COMMUNITY**

DOWNTOWN GRAYLING

Narrative by Jillian Tremonti,
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Social, as part of the Michigan Main
Street Story Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Au Sable River Canoe Marathon

“The Au Sable River Canoe Marathon is an international canoe race that starts in Grayling, and they canoe all the way out to Oscoda. It goes overnight, which a lot of people don’t realize when they sign up. People often train all year and do multiple races to qualify, then work through the night to hit their finish time target.

Along the way, each team also has a team of people called a feeder team who do supply drops for them throughout the race. They have to beat the racers to each point, and it all has to be coordinated and choreographed. It’s incredibly critical for that feeder team to be where they need to be and to drop the correct supplies at the right time. You have to be able to read the racers to know exactly what they need.

This year, we had a record number of entries and a total of 100 teams. 200 people line up with their canoes all the way down this block, a gunshot goes off and they are running and jumping into the river. I’ve never seen anything like it. The first three years I watched it, I cried every time because it’s just so powerful.

Saturday night during the race is crazy in this town—it’s so

fun and the energy is palpable as people follow the racers all the way to Oscoda and watch them finish the race. There are all these gorgeous points along the way like the Mio Dam, and you get to watch the sunrise while the racers are paddling through. The water is glass and it's just breathtaking. It's just a really fascinating event.

The Au Sable River Festival actually began as the Mill Town Festival many, many years ago. Grayling had these two big summertime events, and the attendance for each would ebb and flow. Somewhere along the line, it was decided to put them together and pool the resources to make this big, one-time event happen, and it's been growing ever since.

Along with the race, we have a beer tent and three days of live entertainment just across the finish line downtown. There's a whole food court of food trucks, an entire arts and crafts show in the city park and events all week long leading up to the race. It's a huge celebration."

—Jillian Tremonti, Executive Director of Grayling Main Street

Main Street and Community Vibrancy

"If you boil down Grayling's Main Street program, collaboration is part of our vision and mission. We are a collaborating body bringing all sorts of different voices, thoughts, needs, and desires to the same table to work together.

This year, Grayling turned 150 years old—it's our sesquicentennial. Our community has come together and done quite a few different little pocket events and amplified some of our existing events.

Last year, in preparation for our sesquicentennial, Grayling Main Street applied for a vibrancy grant to do some sprucing up downtown. Across our intersections, we painted paddles, an important part of our culture. We installed lights and completed a few other necessary projects, but a lot of that money went to pay for an installation of a new city clock.



"We are a collaborating body bringing all sorts of different voices, thoughts, needs, and desires to the same table to work together."

Grayling used to have a city clock in front of the jewelry store. That clock disappeared and everybody missed it, so we decided to put in a new one. The project took us five years, so when it was completed thanks to the vibrancy grant, we threw a party to celebrate.

I pulled in a bunch of my musician friends and our really great senior center with its line dancing program. We put on a cornhole tournament. The fire department was here grilling hot dogs and it was a really nice mishmash of community—everybody just seemed so happy. The rest of the summer I got asked, ‘Jill, will you do another block party?’

Grayling has a social district, which we put in place last year on the heels of the pandemic. The block parties are really spun off of this idea of activating social districts, so people know throughout the year they can enjoy that space.

For our five social district businesses, which are all mom-and-pop shops, it worked like gangbusters—we didn’t have to get a liquor license. We didn’t have to recruit volunteers. We weren’t the ones pulling in those funds. Our job is to bolster the economy, and the combination of block parties and social districts help us do that.”

—Jillian Tremonti, Executive Director of Grayling Main Street

Collaboration and Transformation

“There’s a buzz here that’s really fun to be around and we capture all of that together in the downtown area. Every person is kind and has an interesting, unique story and this is a place where people have always been kind-hearted and focused on community-building, whatever that looked like at the time.

Everything has happened organically for us, and I think that’s part of our transformation. Our goal is to keep



pushing into that vein of organic growth. Sure, investment in projects from outside sources is fantastic, but Paddle Hard is locally owned. Michigan Brew is local. These people live where they work and play and that adds a different level of investment, because it’s not just about a financial bottom line. It’s also about what they are providing to this community.

We have a lot of people in leadership at the City and the Chamber of Commerce working toward bringing investment in or helping people build things that are community-focused. We don’t have capacity for a big box store, but we do have capacity to support somebody’s dream to build a brewery or put in an art store.

Those are also the people who are part of the boards, organizations and planning committees and having the conversations every day about what’s next. ‘How do we do this?’ ‘How are we going to move ourselves in this direction?’ There is this really big groundswell of people who care so much about our community and it’s not just about their bottom line.

We have some outside investors coming in and putting in housing for us, which we desperately need. We have such a young population, and currently we’re

missing middle income housing for those who want to work at the hospital or the school system or bring their family and live here by the river.

Luckily, we have people who are wise about where investments need to be. Grayling is unique. Working with people who listen and can respond has been the key for us. There’s a big partnership between Grayling Main Street, the City of Grayling, and the Township of Grayling. Crawford County’s office is also right here at the end of downtown. There’s a lot of crossover between government entities and together, we have a coalition of economic development.

Grayling Main Street also works closely with the Chamber and we’re building bridges with our Rotary. We also work a lot with the Grayling Promotional Association, a group of volunteers who support a lot of our programming.

Beyond those civic organizations, every business owner in our district—and many in our surrounding districts—is also coming to the table. We’re all one big family where everybody’s bringing something to the potluck.”

—Jillian Tremonti, Executive Director of Grayling Main Street

Placemaking

“Placemaking has become really important in Grayling. We’ve done quite a few different projects to really increase the impact of our downtown. We did a lighting project that took us about three years to complete with lots of people donating money, and now we have these beautiful lights strung along the whole downtown district. Phase two will continue the lighting down another street.

When we received the vibrancy grant from the MEDC, besides the city clock, the other big-ticket items we purchased were picnic tables and umbrellas for community events. This fulfills part of our placemaking strategy and brings in some revenue, because we can rent them out when other community groups want to do something downtown or in the area.

We also have a full district banner program as another revenue source for our organization. Annually we do a veteran banner project, and we also just finished our canoe paddler project, where we have pictures of canoes sponsored by outside sources that we display during Canoe Marathon month. We’ve also done banners for graduating seniors, which people really love.

We’re also working on finishing up a bike path project next to our downtown district that will essentially connect us to the Iron Belle Trail.

The final project we’ve been focused on the past few years is a flower partnership with the Grayling Promotional Association—they help us make beautiful baskets and planters. It takes both of those organizations to execute this project, as well as Mr. Nelson, who goes around every day or so at three o’clock in the morning to water the flowers.

Now, when people come to Grayling, they see bright, welcoming flowers, lights, banners and art. All those things have really built character and personality for us.”

—Jillian Tremonti, Executive Director of Grayling Main Street

Paddle Hard Yard

“We are also working on Paddle Hard Yard—shipping containers built into an open-air bar. Paddle Hard Brewing is creating the space, and they’ll have performances down here and a place for community groups to hang out. It’s been two-and-a-half years in the making, a slow and steady march to the finish line as they’ve been figuring things out while they’re also running the brewery. It’s been a big project and everybody is waiting with bated breath for the time we can finally come in here and have a drink and celebrate.

It’s been described as a community backyard. That vibe is perfect for Grayling, because we really are just a giant neighborhood block. It’s magic. I can’t wait for everybody to see it.”

—Jillian Tremonti, Executive Director of Grayling Main Street



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Michigan Main Street Story Series



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