

THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

City of Alma Finalist in Grant Competition Aimed to Establish Downtown Community Spaces

By Emma Selmon
Herald News Editor

The City of Alma has been selected as a finalist in a statewide pitch competition — and will have a chance to win their share of \$50,000 in grant money for a downtown community-building project.

The Consumers Energy Foundation is once again hosting “Put Your Town on the Map,” a pitch competition designed to spur “big ideas in Michigan’s small towns,” the foundation said in a recent press release. Alma was one of 10 finalists selected from a pool of 90 applicants, all communities with a population of 10,000 or less.

“Put Your Town on the Map” will be a part of the Small Town and Rural Development Conference, which will be held virtually on April 13 and 14. There, Alma’s presentation will be up against pitches from Clare, Comins Township, Fowlerville, Galesburg, Manistee, Marshall, Pinckney, Sanford and Vassar.

The top three “projects that build strong communities” will be awarded \$25,000, \$15,000 and \$10,000, respectively.

For Alma, the plan builds on a lot of the placemaking efforts that the City of Alma has committed to in recent years, said City Manager Matt Schooley.

The city is working together with the Gratiot Area Chamber of Commerce, the Alma Community Arts Center, The Alma Action Association and Keep Alma Beautiful to create community spaces downtown and establish an “arts corridor.”

“This would really entail us taking the areas between the Gratiot County Players and the Alma Arts Center and making that more of a space for public areas — for different displays with art, different concepts with art — and then utilizing, actually, some areas both to the east and west of the Chamber building on East Superior for the same things,” said Schooley.

For each of these three spaces, the coalition has plans to bring both art projects and seating areas to make these currently empty spaces into a place for people to gather and build community.

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Over 90 Percent of Students Back in Classroom at Ithaca South Elementary

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

The COVID-19 challenges for all parties involved — students, teachers, and families — have been enormous over the past year. For preschoolers through second graders, the youngest learners in our community, navigating the pandemic has been particularly challenging. David Kanine, the principal at Ithaca South Elementary, hopes to let out a huge sigh of relief next fall. Perhaps, even as he welcomes back the smiling, unmasked faces of those returning students.



KANINE

In spite of the obstacles, Kanine and his staff met the challenges head on. “This school year we were able to begin in-person instruction,” he said. “We’ve had limited access to the building, kept our students in cohorts, washed and sanitized our hands constantly, eaten lunch in our classrooms, and kept classes together for special classes and recess.”

Atop Kanine’s wish list for a return to normalcy will be the opportunity for children to move in and out of those single classroom cohorts. “We miss having our schoolwide intervention time, where classrooms were able to mix freely,” he said. “We are also looking forward to having our students eat together in the cafeteria again.”

There’s something to be said for the togetherness that just cannot be replicated in remote classroom settings. In spite of the “wonderfully best efforts” of teachers, Kanine said. “Teaching beginning reading and writing skills virtually was a big challenge for teachers and kids. They cannot get that immediate feedback in the moment.”

As students continue to move back into the classroom — now over 90 percent as we near spring — teachers have a better chance of engaging children. With 265 kids in all at Ithaca South, there’s ample opportunity to learn from teachers and each other.

That’s not to say there haven’t been some good lessons learned in what’s likely the most challenging year for educators in 100 years. It was certainly Kanine’s toughest in his sixth year in the principal’s office. Yet reported positive feedback from parents who have gotten a better sense of the elementary learning of their children. Not to mention the newfound respect parents may have for the work that teachers have always done.

Additionally, Kanine said, “We added a better platform to interact with families online, allowing us to do video lessons and present activities.”

The app, called Seesaw, will likely be used even as they make their way to 100 percent in-school learning. All year, the teachers prepared for both in-person and virtual students each day, Kanine said. Their ability to focus more and more on the former is welcome news as the spring wraps up and educators warm up for the fall.

And of regardless of what comes next at Ithaca South, Kanine can take pride in the efforts of everyone at school. “All groups have been wonderful in making the adjustments to our day, to our method of teaching, and how to keep learning moving forward,” he said.

Springing forward to fall, Kanine knows they will be stronger and smarter for it.

St. Patrick’s Day



Jon Bos, owner of the Blue Shamrock, sees a steady stream of customers — even at the mandated 50 percent capacity limit. (Herald photos - Meiners)

Greener Days Ahead for the Blue Shamrock

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

Even at the mandated 50 percent capacity, the wait and cook staff at the Blue Shamrock work with quick hands and feet to serve the 6 o’clock dinner crowd. Throughout the downtown St. Louis pub the vibe seems lightyears from the second Friday in March a year ago.

In 2020, perhaps appropriately a Friday the 13th, the NCAA had just cancelled the March Madness basketball tournament. On this evening, a year later, Big Ten teams compete in the conference tourney on big-screen televisions. For Jon Bos, approaching his second St. Patrick’s Day as the pub’s owner, the mounting optimism of it all is like a flashing green light toward better days.

Still, having weathered the worst of a yearlong storm, Bos did not plan a big splash for this year’s greenest day. Though it’s difficult to resist going into full-party mode. “It’s a big deal for us. We would generally open at 9 in the morning,” he said. “We hold the world’s shortest St. Patrick’s Day parade, where everyone walks down to the corner and walks back in.”

The festivities come complete with a grand marshal and live Celtic music all day. Last year, they got the party in the weekend before St. Pat’s, which happened on a Tuesday. Though it was not without some handwringing from Bos. With no statewide guidelines in place then, he consulted with a half dozen people in the industry. “Should I go ahead with the party?” asked Bos, who worried about both the perception of gathering crowds, as well as the possibility that people just wouldn’t show up.

The packed bars throughout the nation may have forced various governors’ hands in deciding to shut things down in the face of a looming pandemic. By March 16, the eve of St. Paddy’s, the Blue Shamrock, along with businesses throughout Michigan, closed its doors by 2 p.m.

Turning to carryout, Bos kept the business open throughout last spring. In fact, they opened for the first time on Sundays with a twofold goal of helping his employees and allowing another eating option for anyone soon weary from home cooking. “If you’re going to be a small community bar, you have to be here for the community,” he said. “It gave everybody the opportunity to have one more day to do something in an environment that honestly wasn’t very fun.”

Through the rough patch Bos did not have to lay off or let go any of some 20 employees. Though he likened some of those lean days to a community center where eight employees might be sitting around waiting for something to do. Still, the college students among them (about 25 percent of the Shamrock’s staff) caught up on schoolwork, or they all planned for uncertain futures, including that of the pub itself. “The thing is,” Bos said, “everyone wanted to work.”

In addition to maintaining all of his crew, Bos is proud to have kept a good thing going through the limited re-openings through the summer and fall. He bought the Blue Shamrock in May 2019, fulfilling a longtime ownership dream. He had worked in sales for Gordon Food Services for 20 years and ran restaurants for 15 years before that. With his children grown

he could commit to the long hours owning a pub.

He already knew the business well. In fact, he had put the menu together for the previous owners. After those folks put it up for sale on a Tuesday night, Bos had an offer in Wednesday morning. Co-owned by Notre Dame and Michigan fans, the duo found common ground over a shared color of those schools. Hence a Wolverine sports bar took on an Irish theme with a blue shamrock. Taking over a solid business with a good reputation, Bos saw no need to change the name.

Renowned for good pub grub — the hamburgers named best in Gratiot County for seven straight years — the Shamrock offers salads and wraps, as well. Domestic beers along with 16 revolving taps, and the requisite Guinness, make it a popular watering hole for nearby folks in St. Louis, Alma, Breckenridge, and Ithaca. Though a “pretty good footprint” attracts northbound travelers from Lansing and elsewhere.

Bos said they’ve been named one of the top 10 Irish pubs in Michigan. “I don’t know, though,” he said with a laugh. “There may only be 11 of them.”

As for the worst of times behind him, Bos eagerly anticipates a 70 percent vaccination rate and the “implied release” that comes when that number is reached. “I’m cautiously optimistic because we have kind of an endgame coming,” he said.

The end of mask-wearing, or even better, the requirement of business owners to be mask police, will certainly be worth a toast or two. Indeed, any desire to make up for St. Patrick’s days lost may be a business boost when patrons can stand shoulder-to-shoulder again inside the Shamrock. At least for a few days.

For servers like Laura Douglas, who has worked at the Blue Shamrock for about three and half years, it’s just good to see the regulars again. She, like everyone else, looks forward to “mask-free” normalcy. “It will be nice to see people having fun without all these restrictions,” she said.

To which any Irishman, or woman — or Michiganders of all persuasions for that matter — might extend a pint to a friend, offering a resounding, “Sláinte!”



Laura Douglas, a Blue Shamrock server, looks forward to mask-free days and “people having fun without all these restrictions.”