

2016 TOP RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES AWARD WINNERS



Ruminant/Harvest Park Project

"Ruminant" is a 6600 John Deere combine clad in 34 agriculturally-themed back lit stained-glass panels. A tribute to agriculture, farming and food, it was first featured as a temporary installation in a field of corn stubble along the October 2013 Farm/Art DTour, an annual 50-mile back roads art tour organized by the Wormfarm Institute, a local art non-profit.

Ruminant won the hearts of a group of local citizens who were determined to make it a permanent installation in their small (pop. 9200), rural community –a community with a very strong agricultural heritage. Shortly after this citizen group organized, the project was adopted by an up-and-coming local arts non-profit called "Reedsburg ArtsLink." Working together, they developed a plan that included raising funds to have the combine re-outfitted by the artist (Karl Unnasch, based in Pilot Mound, MN and La Crosse, WI), purchasing the artwork and donating it to the City of Reedsburg.

In collaboration with the City, the group identified a grassy lot located downtown just opposite the Reedsburg Chamber of Commerce as a site for "Ruminant". The group convinced the City to designate the long vacant lot as a new city park with "Ruminant" as its focal point. Placing "Ruminant" across from the Chamber and near the head of the 400 Trail, the location was also strategic. The Chamber was interested to see if the installation could help draw more visitors to the Reedsburg leg of the 400 Trail.

What was aptly named "Harvest Park", featuring "Ruminant", it is now a wonderful city asset for residents and visitors to enjoy throughout the year. "Ruminant" serves as a great tourist attraction that distinguishes our community and celebrates our rural heritage. Our city did not offer a standout photo op for visitors - but now we do! The park also serves as a gathering place for visitors to the annual Fermentation Fest each October. Recently, visiting developers, impressed with the new park, have decided to build new apartments on the same block.



Forest County Potawatomi Insurance Department

Located within the Forest County Potawatomi Community (FCPC) reservation in rural northeast Wisconsin, FCPID is a progressive tribal organization that provides clients with the guidance and support needed to successfully navigate the perplexing world of health insurance. The creativity of FCPID's approach has established the organization as a forerunner in the provision of insurance services which, in turn, has had a profound impact on the health, well-being, and economy of the community and surrounding region.

FCPID was initially founded to assist Tribal members with the complexity of health insurance. Soon after, FCPID recognized a need for administrative services beyond the Tribal membership and established itself as a Third Party Administrator (TPA). The innovative decision to become one of the only Tribally-owned and operated TPAs has successfully laid the foundation for FCPID to provide many noteworthy services to FCPC members, other Native American tribes, and non-Tribal community members, as well as realize many significant accomplishments.

FCPID has attained many groundbreaking achievements. For example, the staff combined their expertise and understanding of Indian Country with the mainstream benefit plan standards to design the Tribe's own benefit plan, Potawatomi Cares. Additionally, FCPID designed a premier employee health benefits package to help recruit and retain talented employees, helping FCPC to become the largest employer in Forest County. Word of FCPID's expertise spread and, although it is small, it now manages millions of dollars in claims as a TPA and has over 20 tribal governments as its customers.



Green Lake Town Square

Town Square is a vibrant community center that—in less than four years—has become the heart and soul of the Green Lake area, a hub of activity where people come to work, play, learn and share ideas. It was created by applying urban philosophies to our rural community. In an era when rural areas are struggling to compete with cities, when we are losing our best and brightest young people to the cities, Town Square is based on taking what makes cities successful—vibrancy, variety, ideas and action all in close proximity to one another—and applying that formula to our rural area. Indeed, Town Square is like a little city in itself.



At its heart, Town Square is much more than a community center. It is an economic development project, designed to showcase our communities in their best light. Even the layout of our spaces is carefully considered—with tenants in each of our four areas of focus occupying spaces adjacent to the lobby (an art gallery, a non-profit environmental group, a yoga studio, an educational classroom and an artists' co-op). When people walk through our front doors, they look around and frequently say, “Wow. I want to move to Green Lake.” When Naletta Burr, our representative from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, visited, she said, “You have successfully done what every small community in Wisconsin has been trying to do.”

In 2011, after Green Lake County moved its operations from downtown Green Lake to a new facility on the highway outside of town, the historic Courthouse and adjacent buildings sat vacant and decaying in the center of town, creating a strong sense of defeat. In May 2012, Green Lake County sold the buildings to our non-profit organization for \$1.00, and in August, 2012, after an enormous push by volunteers to clear out, repaint and polish up the structures, Town Square opened its doors.

Town Square's has four areas of focus are based on what a community needs to be successful: The Arts, Wellness, Education and the Environment. We hold classes and programs—as well as house tenants—that forward these ideas. Town Square offers opportunities not available in communities the size of Green Lake:

Yoga and Pilates studio, group exercise classes, fully-equipped 24-hour fitness center, skincare and massage studio, art gallery, working art studios, artists co-op store, meeting spaces, non-profit offices, a commercial kitchen business incubator, and a wide variety of classes and programs, including cooking, art, music, career-education and after-school activities for children, plus monthly family bingo games.



Viroqua Chamber Main Street Pop Up Business Initiative



The Viroqua Chamber Main Street developed a program to fill empty store-fronts downtown in Viroqua for the holidays. The goals were to create interest in new shops downtown, to fill storefronts and to increase business to the district. Participants filled out applications and three were selected to fill businesses in the area. Landlords negotiated discounted rent and the Viroqua Chamber Main Street paid for the businesses to reside in the buildings for 2 months. Promotional materials, radio and newspaper publicity, open houses and a major community event, the Twinklefest parade drew attention to the new businesses. Of three that began in the program, two have stayed in their storefronts, negotiating deals with landlords for permanence and have joined the Chamber to be active members of the community. The Chamber plans to continue the effort until all empty store fronts have been filled.

The long term impact will be drawing visibility to downtown Viroqua, creating interest in the downtown and creating opportunity for jobs, growth and success. More shops mean more diversity, more shoppers, more traffic downtown which benefits everyone in Viroqua. This

model is already being reviewed by La Crosse and Richland Center as a reasonable, affordable model to facilitate growth and educate. This initiative was innovative because it had never been done before and involved a little risk. The program cost \$1500 but was a long term investment in the community. For a relatively small amount of money, landlords filled spaces, entrepreneurs got to try out their model for a storefront, the Chamber became visible in the community as assisting businesses and attention was drawn to the downtown.



Milk Source Hunting Land Auction

Since 2011, Milk Source's philanthropic Hunting Land Auction program has raised thousands of dollars for small, rural food pantries while benefiting outdoorsmen statewide.

Through this collaboration, sportsmen make bids for the right to lease portions of the natural habitats under our management. Those financial commitments are paid by the hunters directly to the food pantries in the home communities of our farms. Simply put, our organization operates as a facilitator and conduit, linking donors to local charities – to the benefit of both.

The program has evolved to the point where we have hunters during almost every season, including deer, geese, ducks, turkeys and even some trappers who are willing to pay for the right to pursue muskrat, raccoon and skunks. Hunting leases have grown to multi-year contracts, locking in larger donations and offering the charities a longer and more secure income stream.

While the properties requested can change from year to year, we had our best year ever in 2015 – leasing about 6,281 acres to 50 different hunters. Cumulatively, the hunting rights auction has collected more than \$18,000 for organizations such as the Grand Marsh, Brandon and Freedom food pantries. The success has been emulated by our sister farms in Michigan and Kansas.

The impact on the Grand Marsh Food Pantry alone is significant: Milk Source's funding initiative proved instrumental in the creation – and continued operation – of the non-profit, school-based program. According to the Grand Marsh School District, 90 percent of its children receive free or reduced lunch. Thus, the need for a pantry at the Grand Marsh Elementary School is designed to provide Adams-Friendship families who struggle with hunger access to enough food to maintain a healthy lifestyle. "I have hope in keeping the pantry running because of the unwavering support of Milk Source," notes Megan Wallendal, pantry director.



Flambeau River Community Growing Center

It started in 2012, the idea of using waste heat from the Flambeau mill to heat a greenhouse which in turn will provide high educational classes, food source for the food pantry and community gardens.

The accomplishments of setting up as a non-profit 510(c)3. Providing educational classes and community support. This has been done through WI-Madison, Flambeau mill, UWEX, Price County, and FRCGC committee members.

In turn, youth and adult classes are being held at the site. Raised beds are available for the community members. It is also a food source for fresh foods for the local food pantries.

Long term effect will be collaboration with Charter schools, Chequamegon schools, St. Anthony's school, Lords Cup Board pantries, Park Falls mill, Master Gardeners and community volunteers. Educational classes, fresh vegetables being available will also provide healthier eating, a change in food choices which will lead to less obesity in Price County.

Other communities in the area can come for tours, visuals to take back to their own communities to promote volunteerism and healthier eating choices.

Because this is a non profit organization, to work on sustainability they will be doing grant writing, offering classes at a slight cost, coming up with new alternatives, ideas and moving forward to unleash possibilities that will benefit Price County. This is a great community volunteer group at the Flambeau River Community Growing Center.