

Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.

INNOVATION

In April 2014, Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. (DGRI) and the City of Grand Rapids implemented the GR Forward Master Plan driven by public outreach and involving 4,400 Grand Rapidians through more than 360 events. Through this extensive outreach process, we learned that our citizens desired more activity and programming in the winter months. Since that time, it has been our goal to expand programming, events, and year-round activities downtown. Driving foot-traffic in the colder months of the year helps economic activity, mental and physical health, as well as showcases our beautiful city. Each year, we expand events and programming to further establish our community as a four-season city. This past season, despite pandemic orders shuttering offices and restricting business activity, we were able to (safely and according to state regulations) break pedestrian records for attendance within our downtown..

OUTCOME

This festival has had a positive impact on our local economy including artists, businesses, and property owners. At the time of this submission, our festival is still taking place, so we do not have final impact data, but we do know so far we have had over 400,000 attendees within the months of January and February. The popularity of this festival brings our cost to \$0.87 per attendee, an incredible return on investment. A survey to our downtown businesses is still yet to determine sales numbers but anecdotally we have received confirmation from business owners on the positive outcome World of Winter has had thus far.

With new outdoor seating investments and World of Winter programming, we have finally hit our goal of becoming an active four-season city community as well as making our downtown a destination for winter programming and activation from Michiganders and neighboring states.

With the overwhelming success of this year's festival layout and program, we will be looking at combining our previous format with this year's format for 2022 to create an even larger festival with more one-off large events allowing the festival to continue to grow.

EXECUTION

- August 2020 - Plan layout of World of Winter (WOW) Festival and RFP for winter art installations.
- September 2020 - Outreach to partners for WOW programming, review RFPs and select artists.
- October 2020 - Receive DDA approval on winter art installation proposals.
- November 2020 - WOW Festival plan layout update (from Covid-19) regulations, downtown business outreach, and festival organization for permits and partner programming by submitting an RFP for local artists and event planners for placemaking ideas.
- December 2020 - Events logistics and organizing and communications/marketing coordination.
- January 2021 - Installation and event begins.
- January - March 2021 – Event.
- March - De-installation and coordination on data and impact report.

REPRESENTATION

The festival teamed up with 75 artists. 72 were local to Grand Rapids, one was a national artist and two were international artists. Out of those artists, 60 were of a minority. The festival also collaborated with 20 organizations to host events and activities to which 16 were of a minority.

When deciding to host the Hybycozo installation in Ah-Nab-Awen Park, we reached out to the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians (GRBOI) to receive permission to host these works in this historical park. The DDA then decided to purchase a permanent custom installation to keep here in Grand Rapids and staff worked with Hybycozo, the GRBOI and local tribal member and artist, Alan Compo, to design Manidoo Bawating "The Spirit of the Rapids" that highlights local native symbolism to tell the story of our local tribes' history. We hosted two Tribal Stories events with Chief Ron Yob to tell stories of the tribe.

WOW festival teamed up with Michigan Drag Brunch to host drag shows, teamed up with the Grand Rapids Asian-Pacific Islander Association to host the Lunar NY event with traditional activities as well as honoring Black History Month by providing walking tours highlighting local black history.

REPLICATION

World of Winter festival could be replicated at large in many ways. We focus on activating the colder months of the year, which most northern states tend to struggle with, by hosting free outdoor programming in public spaces. Acknowledging this issue and confronting it is the start to promote change. By creating an RFP (and a cast call for ideas out to the community), you create a network with those community members to help implement your strategy. By providing the opportunity for people to get involved, helping them through the application or permitting processes, and providing funding resources you are establishing an environment of creativity and driving a community-led advancement for change.

Our team collaborates with a lot of artists to drive creative ideas and solutions. By finding unique ways to program our downtown, we create fun and one-of-a-kind experiences. When teaming up with other community organizations and artists, community members involved feel they have a stake in what you are trying to accomplish.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The biggest complexities of World of Winter were timing and Covid-19 restrictions. Each time we planned something or decided on an art installation, we had to address how we were going to handle crowd control, access, health and safety issues that we never had to address before.

We had the entire event focusing on large scale events but with Covid-19 restrictions, we were limited to having no more than 25 attendees per event. With this restriction, that changed only a couple months before the festival was supposed to start, we decided to focus heavily on scattered programming, pop-up events and artworks that would happen throughout the two months of the festival. With this extension, attendees would not need to rush to experience everything at the same time but could return again and again to experience different activations. We spread out installations, events, and activities throughout our entire downtown and created signage at every installation and event providing social distance guidelines as well as hand sanitizing stations. Our team also made sure to clean each installation throughout the day to mitigate the risk of Covid-19.